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AVICENNA ON HUMAN SELF-INTELLECTION

BORIS HENNIG

Ryerson University, Toronto

Email: hennig@ryerson.ca

Abstract. I argue that Avicenna allows for at least one case where we can intellectually grasp a particular individual as such: Each human intellect can intellect itself as numerically this one intellect without relying on any general notion or concept. This is because humans can retain their individuality when separated from their bodies. I discuss passages in which Avicenna appears to affirm and deny that humans can intellect themselves. I conclude that in contrast to the self-awareness that Avicenna showcases in his “floating human” thought experiment, human self-intellection is a rare achievement, and I explain how it differs from the more perfect self-intellection of the divine intellect.

Résumé. Je soutiens qu’Avicenne admet au moins un cas où il est possible pour notre intellect de saisir un individu particulier en soi : chaque intellect humain peut s’appréhender comme étant numériquement lui-même sans avoir recours à une notion ou un concept général. Car l’être humain préserve son identité lorsqu’il est séparé de son corps. Nous discutons des textes où Avicenne semble affirmer et nier qu’un être humain peut s’appréhender lui-même. Nous concluons que, contrairement à la conscience de soi qu’invoque Avicenne dans l’expérience de pensée de «l’homme volant», l’auto-intellection humaine est une réalisation rare et nous expliquons ce qui la distingue de l’auto-intellection plus complète de l’intellect divin.

1. INTRODUCTION

According to Avicenna and many other Aristotelians, we grasp general concepts by means of our intellect, and we connect to particular individuals by means of our senses.¹ How clear cut is this division? Can we also intellect individuals in their individuality? That is, can we intellectually connect to numerically one individual, without identifying it exclusively in general terms? Would we be able to intellectually grasp the difference between two exactly similar individuals? I will argue that Avicenna allows for at least one such case: Each human intellect can intellect itself as numerically one and distinct, and when it does so, it does not rely on any general notion or concept.²

¹ Dimitri Gutas, *Avicenna and the Aristotelian Tradition* (Brill, 2014), p. 344.

Before we begin, it will be good to briefly consider the notion of an individual. Individuality, as I understand the term here, is a matter of numerical identity: *A* and *B* are the same individual if and only if they are the same in number. The intelligibility of individuals is often discussed in the context of questions about God's knowledge of *particulars*. Individuals and particulars are not exactly the same, though. Avicenna defines "particular" (*al-ḡuzʿī*) as something "the proper conception of which prevents that its meaning is said of many," and he gives the self (or essence) of Zayd as an example.³ Although this is a very general notion, it applies only to things of which there can be a proper conception. Also, the etymology of the word "particular," as well as the Arabic term that Avicenna uses, suggests something more specific: Particulars are, in some sense, *parts* of something. This suggests that not all individuals are particulars, which might be the reason why Avicenna often prefers other expressions for numerically singular items: "specific" (*ḥaṣṣ*), "pointed at" (*muṣār ʿilayhā*), and "individual" (*šahṣ*).

Calling individuals "specific" might still seem inappropriate, because it suggests that the difference between two numerically distinct horses, for instance, is like the difference between two species, such as *equus caballus* and *equus asinus*. Avicenna is aware of this disanalogy, but he still wishes to convey the idea that two numerically distinct instances of the same kind are rendered distinct by something that is added to their common essence. In one passage, he says that the common nature *horseness* is rendered "specific" in the relevant sense when it is combined with accidents that are pointed at (*ʿaʿrād muṣār ʿilayhā*).⁴ In this case, the phrase "pointed at" does the real individuating work. By combining an essence with a generic accident, e.g. horseness with blackness, we could not make sure that the resulting notion refers to exactly one individual. This only works if we combine the essence with an *individual* accident.

² See Rahim Acar, "Reconsidering Avicenna's Position on God's Knowledge of Particulars," in Jon McGinnis (ed.), *Interpreting Avicenna: Science and Philosophy in Medieval Islam* (Brill, 2004), p. 142-156, esp. p. 156, where he suggests something like this in a footnote.

³ See *Metaphysics* V 1, 3: Avicenna, *Al-šifāʿ, Ilāhiyāt*, ed. G. C. Anawati et al. (Cairo, 1960) (henceforth *Metaphysics*, Cairo ed.), p. 196, l. 5; Avicenna, *The Metaphysics of The Healing*, tr. Marmura (Brigham Young, 2005) (henceforth *Metaphysics*, tr. Marmura), p. 149.

⁴ *Metaphysics* V 1 1,4, Cairo ed. p. 196, l. 16, tr. Marmura p. 149. On the difference between specification and individuation in Avicenna, cf. Fedor Benevich, "Individuation and identity in Islamic philosophy after Avicenna: Bahmanyār and Suhrawardī," *British Journal for the History of Philosophy*, vol. 28, no. 1 (2020), 4-28, esp. 14.

“Item pointed at” is thus Avicenna’s most basic term for referring to individuals as such. It is also very general in its application. We can point at particulars, but also, in or with our intellects, at common natures, such as horseness,⁵ and at the necessary existent.⁶ The metaphor of pointing conveys two useful ideas. First, things we can point at are things we can count, which means that point-at-ability is associated with numerical identity. Second, as we will see later on, the act of pointing at something is logically independent of the act of subsuming it under a concept.

I am here assuming that “individual” and “point-at-able” amount to the same, and I am asking whether the human intellect can intellect itself in its individuality. Let us therefore, still by way of preparation, briefly consider the most famous case of self-knowledge in Avicenna, which I will re-baptize “the floating human.”⁷ This scenario involves the assumption that any human being can know of her existence as an individual being (her *ʿanniyya*)⁸ without making use of any of her inner or outer senses.⁹ The floating human knows herself in her individual-

⁵ Cf. *Metaphysics* V 1, 12, Cairo ed. p. 200, l. 1, tr. Marmura p. 152. Note that pointing at universals and common natures, though possible, amounts to treating them as individuals. There is thus a sense in which “universal” and “pointed at” are opposites (cf. Amélie Marie Goichon, *Lexique de la langue philosophique d’Ibn Sina (Avicenne)*, Paris, Desclée de Brouwer, 1938, p. 167).

⁶ *Metaphysics* VIII 4, 9, Cairo ed. p. 346, l. 8, tr. Marmura p. 275.

⁷ AKA “flying man.” There are several versions of the floating human in Avicenna, here I rely on the one in *Pointers and Reminders* III 1. See Avicenna, *Iṣārāt wa Tanbihāt*, ed. Forget (Brill, 1892) (henceforth *Pointers and Reminders*, ed. Forget), p. 119; Avicenna, *Remarks and Admonitions* II-III, *Physics and Metaphysics*, tr. Inati (Columbia University Press, 2014) (henceforth *Pointers and Reminders*, tr. Inati), p. 94; cf. Michael E. Marmura, “Avicenna’s ‘Flying Man’ in Context,” *Monist*, vol. 69, no. 3 (1986), p. 383-395, esp. p. 391. Note that here and in the following, section numbers refer to the non-logical parts of *Pointers and Reminders*.

⁸ *Pointers and Reminders* III 1, ed. Forget p. 119, l. 10. For *ʿanniyya* see Goichon, *Lexique*, p. 9; Marie-Thérèse d’Alverny, “Anniya-Anitas,” in *Mélanges offert à Étienne Gilson de l’Académie Française* (Paris: Vrin, 1959), p. 59-91, esp. 80-82; Dag. N. Hasse, *Avicenna’s De Anima in the Latin West* (The Warburg Institute, 2000), p. 82-3; Ahmed Alwishah, *Avicenna’s Philosophy of Mind*, Ph. D. thesis (UCLA, 2006), p. 36-42 and 53; Jari Kaukua, *Self-Awareness in Islamic Philosophy* (Cambridge Univ. Press, 2015), p. 39; Damien Janos, *Avicenna on the Ontology of Pure Quiddity*, (De Gruyter, 2020), p. 543.

⁹ The exact import and interpretation of the floating human scenario is a matter of some debate, which I do not wish to enter here. See, among many others, Marmura, “Avicenna’s ‘Flying Man’ in Context;” Hasse, *Avicenna’s De Anima in the Latin West*, 80-92; Alwishah, *Avicenna’s Philosophy of Mind*, 42-62; Peter Adamson and Fedor Benevich, “The Thought Experimental Method: Avicenna’s Flying Man Argument,” *Journal of the American Philosophical Association*, vol. 4, no. 2 (2018), 147-164.

ity without being able to rely on any distinguishing marks. She does not experience herself as a specific instance of a kind. In fact, the self-awareness of the floating human does not involve the use of any means of knowing. Avicenna writes:

I do not believe that you need an intermediary at this point, so it [i.e. that by which you apprehend yourself] is not an intermediary. So it remains that you apprehend yourself without requiring any other faculty or intermediary. So it remains that it is by your senses or by your inner without an intermediary.¹⁰

Avicenna says, first, that the self-awareness of the floating human cannot be due to any cognitive faculty. Then he seems to take this back by acknowledging that self-awareness is the work of some sense, or some inner faculty. Unless the text is corrupt, his point must be that if self-awareness involves any cognitive faculty at all, then this faculty must coincide with the self. This means that self-awareness is an act of the intellect only if the self and the intellect are the same. Since we do not know whether this is so, it would not be safe at this point to assume that the floating human's self-awareness is a case of self-intellection.¹¹ It might well be a sort of knowledge that is neither intellectual nor due to any bodily sense organ.¹² And then, the floating human scenario will not show that humans can intellect their individual selves. Since I am interested in human self-intellection, I will therefore set the floating human aside for now.

We know that there is at least one intellect in Avicenna's world that is able to intellect itself. According to Aristotle, self-intellection is the sole activity of the highest being (Aristotle, *Metaphysics* Λ 9). As Avicenna emphasizes, the divine intellect is not a specific instance of any general kind. He argues that there can only be one highest being, because if there were two, they would have to be rendered distinct by something external to them, and this would contradict the assumption that each of them is necessary.¹³ As a consequence, it does not even make sense to furnish the highest being with an essence. Instead, it only has an *'annīya*.¹⁴

¹⁰ *Pointers and Reminders* III 2, ed. Forget p. 119, l. 14-17, tr. Inati p. 94-5.

¹¹ Cf. Kaukua, *Self-Awareness*, p. 36; Ahmed Alwishah, "Avicenna on Self-Cognition and Self-Awareness," in Ahmed Alwishah and John Hayes (eds.), *Aristotle and the Arabic Tradition* (Cambridge Univ. Press, 2015), p. 143-163.

¹² Deborah L. Black, "Avicenna on Self-Awareness and Knowing that One Knows," in Fazlur Rahman et al. (eds.), *The Unity of Science in the Arabic Tradition* (Springer, 2008), p. 63-87, esp. 73; Kaukua, *Self-Awareness*, p. 60-61 and 99.

¹³ *Metaphysics* I 7, 1-3, Cairo ed. p. 43-4, tr. Marmura p. 34-5.

¹⁴ *Metaphysics* VIII 4, 9, Cairo ed. p. 346, l. 12, tr. Marmura p. 276.

If the divine intellect is an individual, then it will have to be intellecting a singular individual as such. But again, this does not imply that *humans* can intellect their individual selves.¹⁵ There is another place in the vicinity, though, where one might look for human self-intellection. Mystically inclined authors sometimes describe human self-intellection as a way of coming close to God. Ibn Ṭufayl, for instance, has his protagonist Ḥayy Ibn Yaḳzān reason as follows:

He knew that [the highest being's] knowledge of itself is not a notion additional to its self, but its self *is* its knowledge of itself, and its knowledge of itself *is* its self. It became clear to him that, if it were possible for him [i.e. Ḥayy] to know himself, this knowledge by which he knows himself would not be a notion additional to himself [either], but he would be it. So he saw that the imitation of [the necessary existent's self-knowledge] amounted to knowing it alone without associating it with any bodily attributes.¹⁶

Ḥayy's idea is that humans may come to know God by perfecting their self-knowledge. This is supposed to work as follows. The divine intellect is essentially self-intellecting, which means that for the divine intellect, being what it is and intellecting itself are the same. Everything that *does* what the divine intellect *does* will actually *be* what it *is*. Therefore, we might be able to come to know the divine intellect in the following way. Suppose we manage to intellect ourselves, and nothing but ourselves. If we do this, the self that we are intellecting will be a self-intellecting intellect. But the divine intellect is nothing but a self-intellecting intellect. There will thus be a sense in which by intellecting our own self-intellecting intellect, we will be intellecting something that is essentially the same as the divine intellect.

Ibn Ṭufayl is careful to disavow the apparent implication that we will thus *be* the divine intellect,¹⁷ but he does want to suggest that we will be

¹⁵ For more on divine self-intellection, see Peter Adamson, "Avicenna and his Commentators on Human and Divine Self-Intellection," in Dag Hasse and Amos Bertolacci (eds.), *The Arabic, Hebrew and Latin Reception of Avicenna's Metaphysics* (De Gruyter, 2011), p. 97-122.

¹⁶ Ibn Ṭufayl, *Ḥayy Ibn Yaḳzān*, ed. Gauthier (Beirut, 1936), p. 118, l. 9 – p. 119, l. 1. The second sentence is ambiguous. Gauthier (p. 85) and Goodman (in his translation, *Ibn Ṭufayl's Ḥayy Ibn Yaḳzān*, New York, Twayne Publishers, 1972, p. 148) read: If Ḥayy were to know the essence (or self) of *the necessary existent*, this knowledge would be the same as *the necessary existent*. But Ḥayy's knowledge does not necessarily exist, so Ibn Ṭufayl cannot want to identify the necessary existent with Ḥayy's knowledge. Khalidi translates correctly (Muhammad Ali Khalidi, *Medieval Islamic Philosophical Writings*, Cambridge Univ. Press, 2005, p. 145).

¹⁷ *Ḥayy ibn Yaḳzān*, ed. Gauthier, p. 124, l. 3-7. Ibn Ṭufayl argues that at this point, the notion of numerical sameness no longer applies, which also implies that the relevant

able to *know* the divine intellect. The idea is that humans may come to know God without actually aiming at knowing God. All they need to aim at is perfect intellectual knowledge of their own human intellects. If this is what Ḥayy has in mind, human self-intellection will be a rare achievement. It will be what happens when humans assimilate themselves to God.

In the present context, this is all the more interesting because Ibn Ṭufayl refers to the following passage from Avicenna in his introduction to *Ḥayy ibn Yaqzān*.¹⁸ In *Pointers and Reminders* IX 17, Avicenna describes the final stage of the development of the mystical “knower” as follows:

Then, as the knower withdraws from his soul, he notices solely the atrium of the sanctuary.¹⁹ If he notices his soul, then insofar as it [i.e. the soul] is noticing, not insofar as anything inheres in it.²⁰ At this point the arrival becomes real.²¹

In my translation, Avicenna appears to say that the knower arrives at the ultimate form of knowledge by engaging in a form of pure self-noticing: an act of noticing that has no object other than this very act of noticing. There are, however, reasons for reading the passage in a different way, so that Avicenna ends up saying that the arrival is real when the knower notices nothing but their noticing of *the Truth* (i.e. God).²² For, up to this point, the Truth had been what the knower was aiming at. Also, when Avicenna says that the knower notices solely the

act of self-intellection does *not* have an individual object. If I am right, Avicenna would not agree.

¹⁸ *Ḥayy ibn Yaqzān*, ed. Gauthier, p. 7, l. 5-7.

¹⁹ I take *ḡanāb al-quds* to figuratively refer to the atrium of a temple. Cf. Edward W. Lane, *An Arabic-English Dictionary* (London: Williams & Norgate, 1862), s.v. *ḡanāb*: “A court, or yard, or an open or a wide space in front of a house or extending from its sides.” Nothing depends on this, though.

²⁰ Literally “... insofar as it is embellished.” Cf. Avicenna, *Avicenna’s De anima*, ed. Rahman (Oxford Univ. Press, 1959) (henceforth, *Psychology*, ed. Rahman), V 6, p. 240, l. 7, for a passage where *zayyana* means “to inhere.”

²¹ *Pointers and Reminders* IX 17, ed. Forget p. 204, l. 7-9; Avicenna, *Avicenna and Mysticism*, tr. Inati (London: Kegan Paul, 1996) (henceforth *Pointers and Reminders*, tr. Inati), p. 88.

²² This is how Corbin (Henry Corbin, *Avicenna and the Visionary Recital*, tr. Trask, Irving, Spring Publications, 1980, p. 240), Inati (p. 88) and Janssens (Jules Janssens, “Ibn Sīnā: A Philosophical Mysticism or a Philosophy of Mysticism?” *Mediterranea*, no. 1, 2016, p. 37-54, esp. 48-49) read the passage. There is also a textual variant in some older manuscripts of Ṭūsī’s commentary: “... if he notices his soul, then insofar as it is noticing it” (Nasīr al-Dīn al-Ṭūsī, *Šarḥ al-išārāt wa-l-tanbihāt*, ed. al-Āmoli, Qom, Bustāne Ketāb, 2007, p. 1069, n. 1).

atrium of the sanctuary, he introduces a rather specific, external object of knowledge. His point might thus well be that even though the knower might still notice her soul, this will be negligible in comparison to her noticing of the Truth and the atrium of the sanctuary. If we read the text in this way, however, it will merely tell us that the ultimate object of knowledge is the Truth, which is not very informative. It will also be unclear why the knower's noticing of her own noticing is mentioned at all. The reading I am defending is more interesting because it suggests that the Truth that the knower is arriving at *is* her own act of pure self-noticing.

Now, since the passage from *Pointers and Reminders* IX 17 does not mention the intellect, and there are two possible ways of reading it, it cannot answer my question, whether human self-intellection is possible. But it can motivate it. If there are independent reasons for thinking that Avicenna allows for human self-intellection, the passage will fall into place. It will then confirm that self-intellection occupies an important place in Avicenna's philosophy. And it will suggest that such self-intellection differs from the self-awareness of the floating human. For humans, self-intellection and pure self-noticing will be an exceptional spiritual achievement.

So, in this paper, I will ask whether the human intellect can intellect itself in its individuality. I will approach this question from several angles. I will begin by pointing out that Avicenna rejects Aristotle's arguments against human self-intellection (section 2), and that he leaves conceptual space for the intellection of non-universals and, arguably, individuals (section 3). I will argue that individuals are intelligible as numerically one if that which renders them numerically one individual is intelligible. Now, since it looks like the human intellect is in fact individuated by its ties to a human body, this gives us no reason to expect it to be intelligible in its individuality (section 4). I will briefly highlight a couple of passages where Avicenna seems to confirm this negative finding, by claiming that only the divine intellect can truly intellect itself. There are, however, other passages where he clearly says that the human intellect *can* and even *does* intellect itself (section 5). In order to resolve this tension, I will discuss a passage from the *Notes* in more detail (section 6). I will conclude that the human intellect can intellect itself as numerically one individual to the extent to which it manages to separate itself from matter, while retaining its numerical identity.

2. AVICENNA VS. ARISTOTLE

In *De anima* III 4, Aristotle famously argues that the human intellect starts out as a mere potential, so that it is nothing in actuality unless it takes on the form of some object other than itself (429b30-31). This means that the human intellect can intellect itself, but only while and insofar as it is intellecting something other than itself. This is how Aquinas will describe the condition of the embodied human intellect, in explicit opposition to Avicenna (*Summa theologiae* Ia 87,1).

Avicenna rejects the idea that any existing thing might be purely potential.²³ As he sees it, nothing can exist without actually being anything, and nothing can have the potential for taking on any further form without existing.²⁴ Matter, for instance, cannot exist at all unless it actually has some form or other.²⁵ If this is so, the intellect cannot be prepared to receive any further form unless it already has a nature of its own.²⁶

One might think that Avicenna must deny the possibility of self-intellection, because he argues that the intellect can never come to be identical to its object. The latter follows from the claim that the intellect must always already have a nature of its own. If there is a form that constitutes the nature of the intellect, the intellect will cease to exist when it ceases to exhibit this form, and it will differ from all other things as long as it has this form. Therefore, the human intellect cannot come to be anything that does not have the nature of the intellect.²⁷ The reason for this is that quite generally, no two numerically distinct things can ever come to be identical.²⁸ This, however, does not mean that the intellect can never *be* identical to its object.²⁹ It means that it

²³ Cf. *Physics* II 1, 2: Avicenna, *Al-šifāʿ, Ṭabīʿiyāt*, ed. Zāyid (Cairo, 1983) (henceforth *Physics*, ed. Zāyid), p. 81, l. 7-8; Avicenna, *The Physics of The Healing*, tr. McGinnis (Brigham Young, 2009), p. 107. Cf. Catarina Belo, *Chance and Determinism in Avicenna and Averroes* (Brill, 2007), p. 59.

²⁴ *Metaphysics* VI 4, 4, Cairo ed. p. 280, l. 5-6, tr. Marmura p. 216.

²⁵ *Metaphysics* VIII 5, 8, Cairo ed. p. 352, l. 1-2, tr. Marmura p. 281.

²⁶ Avicenna, *Glosses on De anima*, in Badawi, *Aristū ʿind al-ʿarab* (Cairo, 1947), p. 75-116, esp. p. 100, l. 17-18.

²⁷ *Glosses*, Badawi p. 105, l. 16-18; *Pointers and Reminders* VII 7, ed. Forget p. 178-9, tr. Inati p. 169-70; Peter Adamson, “Porphyrius Arabus’ on Nature and Art: 463F Smith in Context,” in George Karamanolis and Anne Sheppard (eds.), *Studies on Porphyry* (London: Institute of Classical Studies, 2007), p. 141-163, esp. Appendix 1. As Lewis (Frank A. Lewis, “Self-Knowledge in Aristotle,” *Topoi*, no. 15, 1996, p. 39-58) argues, a charitable reading should not even attribute any such assumption to Aristotle.

²⁸ *Psychology* V 6, ed. Rahman p. 239, l. 10 – p. 241, l. 1.

can never *come to* be identical to anything that it has not been identical to all along. It *can* be identical to its object if this object is itself. So far, then, we have no reason for denying that the human intellect may intellect itself.

3. HOW TO INTELLECT INDIVIDUALS

Avicenna says in the *Investigations* that if the intellect could grasp nothing but universals, self-intellection would be impossible.³⁰ Presumably, this is so because for the intellect to grasp itself is not to grasp a universal. Now, although Avicenna has a hard time explaining how the divine intellect can know certain kinds of particulars,³¹ he never says that intellection can only be of universals.³² What is more, he actually cites the intellect and the soul as exceptions:

Not all intelligibles are universal meanings, for instance, the intellect and the soul [are not].³³

Now of course, that something is not a universal meaning need not imply that it is an individual. In his writings on universals, Avicenna ar-

²⁹ As Morewedge thinks. See Parvis Morewedge, "Ibn Sīnā's Concept of the Self," *The Philosophical Forum*, vol. 5 no. 1 (1972), 49-73, esp. p. 58.

³⁰ Avicenna, *Mubāhathāt*, ed. Bidarfar (Qom, 1992), [282-3] p. 118, l. 9-18; Avicenna, *Mubāhathāt*, in Badawi, *Aristū 'ind al-'arab* (Cairo, 1947), p. 119-239 (henceforth *Investigations*, ed. Badawi), p. 208, l. 16-22. See Shlomo Pines, "La conception de la conscience de soi chez Avicenne et chez Abu'l-Barakat al-Baghdadi," *Archives d'histoire doctrinale et littéraire du Moyen Age*, 21 (1954), 21-98, esp. p. 46-56; Paul Hardy, *Avicenna on Knowledge of the Self*, Ph. D. thesis (Univ. of Chicago, 1996), p. 239; Black, "Avicenna on Self-Awareness and Knowing that One Knows," p. 73-6; and Kaukua, *Self-Awareness*, p. 97-103 for discussions of this passage.

³¹ There is an extensive amount of literature on this. See, for starters, Michael E. Marmura, "Some Aspects of Avicenna's Theory of God's Knowledge of Particulars," *Journal of the American Oriental Society*, vol. 82, no. 3 (1962), 299-312; Acar, "Reconsidering Avicenna's Position;" Hatem Zghal, "La connaissance des singuliers chez Avicenne," in Régis Morelon and Ahmad Hasnawi (eds.), *De Zénon d'Élée à Poincaré* (Louvain: Peeters, 2004); and Peter Adamson, "On Knowledge of Particulars," *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society*, vol. 105, no. 1 (2005), 273-294.

³² Kaukua (*Self-Awareness*, p. 49) refers to *Isagoge* I 5 and *Metaphysics* V 1 of *The Healing* for the claim that "intelligibility entails potential universality," but I cannot find any such claim in these passages. What Avicenna says is that although *some universal* expressions may as a matter of fact apply to only one thing, they do potentially apply to many in terms of their intelligible meaning. This does not imply that *all intelligible* expressions are potentially universal.

³³ Avicenna, *Al-ta'liqat*, ed. Mousavian (Tehran, 2013) (henceforth *Notes*, ed. Mousavian), [332] p. 213, l. 10; Avicenna, *Al-ta'liqat*, ed. Badawi (Cairo, 1973) (henceforth *Notes*, ed. Badawi), p. 80, l. 18.

gues that common natures such as *horseness* are in themselves neither one nor many in number.³⁴ This means that common natures are, in themselves, neither universals nor individuals. The same might be true of the intellect and the soul. But then, Avicenna also emphasizes that everything that exists must be either one or many in number,³⁵ which implies that common natures do not in themselves exist. Avicenna's point can only be that common natures do not exist in themselves, although they do exist in other things, such as the mind or the world.³⁶ By the same token, they will be neither one nor many in number in themselves, but they will always be either one or many in number wherever they exist. And this will mean that the intellect, too, must be either one or many in number wherever it exists. Most likely the first. Therefore, if the intellect is to intellect itself as existing, it must intellect itself as numerically one individual.

Elsewhere, Avicenna gives a hint as to how one might be able to intellect an individual as such:

It has become clear that the universal meaning is not apprehended by a body and it is clear that the specific meaning (*al-ma'na al-šahṣī*), which is specific due to bodily accidents, such as a definite limit and a definite place, is not apprehended without a body. ... However, whenever the particular (*al-ġuzʿī*) is rendered specific not by size and position and the like, nothing hinders that [the intellect] is aware of it, and the impossibility of this has not been shown anywhere.³⁷

The point is that there are many factors that might render a thing specific (i.e. particular, individual), and not all of them need to render it unintelligible. Presumably, if that which individuates a thing is in itself unintelligible, then it will render the resulting individual just as unintelligible. Things that are individual due to their matter, for instance, will be at least as unintelligible as their matter.³⁸ Such things can become

³⁴ *Metaphysics* V 1, 4, Cairo ed. p. 196, l. 10-13, tr. Marmura p. 149.

³⁵ E.g. *Metaphysics* V 1, 19, Cairo ed. p. 202, l. 14, tr. Marmura p. 153.

³⁶ Note that Janos (in *Avicenna on the Ontology of Pure Quiddity*) would disagree; see Boris Hennig, "Review of Damien Janos, *Avicenna on the Ontology of Pure Quiddity*," *Philosophical Quarterly*, 2020, online.

³⁷ *Investigations*, ed. Bidarfar, [279] p. 117, l. 11-13, ed. Badawi, [371] p. 208, l. 6-8. Cf. Pines, "La conception de la conscience de soi," p. 47-51; Black, "Avicenna on Self-Awareness and Knowing that One Knows," p. 74; Deborah Black, "Avicenna on Individuation, Self-Awareness, and God's Knowledge of Particulars," in Richard C. Taylor and Irfan Omar (eds.), *The Judeo-Christian-Islamic Heritage* (Marquette Univ. Press, 2012), p. 255-281, esp. 271-2; Kaukua, *Self-Awareness*, p. 98-103.

³⁸ For the claim that matter prevents intelligibility, see Avicenna's *Metaphysics* VIII 6, 6-7, Cairo ed. p. 356, l. 16 – p. 357, l. 9, tr. Marmura p. 284-5; *Notes*, ed. Mousa-

intelligible only when we separate them from that which individuates them. As a consequence, what is intelligible about them will no longer be individual.³⁹ This is in line with a suggestion that Avicenna makes elsewhere, that the intellect is confined to universal meanings when its object is *external* to it.⁴⁰ For, arguably, external things are individuated by factors that are not intelligible, such as matter.

However, if there are any things that are individuated by *intelligible* factors, these things need not at all be unintelligible in their individuality.⁴¹ In order to intellect them, one will not need to separate them from that which individuates them.

There are generally three ways in which one may know an individual as such, that is, as numerically this one item:⁴²

- One may know that the item in question is the sole member of its kind. For this to happen, one will have to know a description of the item in question of which one also knows, for instance by scientific proof, that it applies to no other individual.⁴³

- One may distinguish the item in question from all other instances of the same kind by pointing at it, for instance by locating it in space and time.

- One may identify it as this one instance by relating it to another item that is already known as an individual.⁴⁴

Note that in most cases, the second way of knowing an individual as such is actually a version of the third one: When we point at a physical thing, we locate it in space and time relative to our own particular bodies, or relative to a unique point in spacetime that we treat as the origin of a coordinate system. We have seen another instance of (3) in our preliminary reflection on individuality: Avicenna says that a common nature may be rendered specific by being associated with an individual accident.

vian, [319] p. 203, l. 11, ed. Badawi p. 77, l. 25; Peter Adamson, "Avicenna and his Commentators," p. 113-4.

³⁹ Cf. Hardy, *Avicenna on Knowledge of the Self*, p. 189.

⁴⁰ *Investigations*, ed. Bidarfar, [282-3] p. 118, l. 9-18; ed. Badawi, [372] p. 208, l. 16-22.

⁴¹ Cf. Black, "Avicenna on Individuation, Self-Awareness, and God's Knowledge of Particulars," p. 256. This point will have implications for the question of whether God can intellect particulars. I will not pursue this here.

⁴² Cf. Zghal, "La connaissance des singuliers," p. 704.

⁴³ Marmura, "Some Aspects of Avicenna's Theory," p. 309; Allan Bäck, "The Islamic Background: Avicenna and Averroes," in J. E. Gracia (ed.), *Individuation in Scholasticism: The Later Middle Ages and the Counter-Reformation* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1994), p. 51.

⁴⁴ Zghal, "La connaissance des singuliers," p. 694-5.

Given these three options, and given that Avicenna likes to refer to individuals as things “pointed at,” it makes most sense to describe self-knowledge as a special kind of “pointing.” This is a version of option (2). To be aware of oneself is to be able to identify oneself, for instance by means of an indexical or demonstrative expression such as the first person pronoun.⁴⁵ This “pointing” need not happen in space and time. As John Perry shows,⁴⁶ one may be able to point at any location in space and time without knowing which of these locations is one’s *own* location. And as Avicenna shows (with his “floating human” scenario), one may successfully refer to oneself without being able to point at any specific location in space. The “pointing” involved in self-awareness does not involve any bodily organ, and therefore, it does not depend on the senses. It constitutes a way of identifying an individual “not by size and position and the like,” and as Avicenna suggests, this might open up a way for the intellect to apprehend an individual without demonstrating that a certain description applies to only this one individual.

I have said that the intellect can grasp an individual as such if that which renders this individual numerically one is intelligible, and then I have argued that the soul and the intellect may “point” at themselves without using any bodily organ. These are not quite the same. That by means of which we *identify* an individual need not be that which *makes* it this one individual. Therefore, that there is a way of relating to an individual item without the use of a bodily organ does not mean that the item in question can *be* this one individual in the absence of a body. So, how intelligible is that which *makes* each human intellect numerically one?

4. WHAT INDIVIDUATES HUMAN INTELLECTS

Presumably, human intellects are individuated by the same factors that individuate human souls. According to Avicenna, the latter are individuated by their present or former ties to a particular human body.⁴⁷

⁴⁵ Cf. Kaukua, *Self-Awareness*, p. 93.

⁴⁶ John Perry, “The Problem of the Essential Indexical,” *Noûs*, vol. 13, no. 1 (1979), p. 3-21.

⁴⁷ Cf. Thérèse-Anne Druart, “The Human Soul’s Individuation and its Survival after the Body’s Death: Avicenna on the Causal Relation Between Body and Soul,” *Arabic Sciences and Philosophy*, 10 (2000), 259-273; Michael E. Marmura, “Some Questions regarding Avicenna’s Theory of the Temporal Origination of the Human Rational Soul,” *Arabic Sciences and Philosophy*, 18 (2008), 121-138; Kaukua, *Self-Awareness*, p. 45.

In *Psychology* V 3, he argues that human souls cannot exist before being connected to a body, because there would be nothing before this point which would render them numerically distinct from one another.⁴⁸ There is only one human form for all humans. When this form informs a human body, it is an individual soul. Before it does so, it is nothing individual at all. If human souls owe their individuality to the particularity of portions of matter, the factor that renders them numerically one will not be intelligible in itself.

On the other hand, Avicenna argues that human souls can retain their numerical identity after being separated from their body.⁴⁹ Once a soul is individuated as a result of being associated with a particular human body, he explains, several factors may contribute to its continued numerical distinctness in the absence of this body. There are, to begin with, certain immaterial attributes of the soul, such as the immaterial portion of what it has learned and experienced, as well as the immaterial character that it has developed as a consequence of initiating certain bodily actions. Further, there is the fact that every soul, as soon as it exists, is aware of itself as numerically one individual. Finally, says Avicenna, there might be individuating factors that are unknown to us.⁵⁰

Now it is notoriously conceivable that two human beings have thought, learned, and done the exact same things in their lives.⁵¹ Imagine two floating humans, for instance, both of which have just popped into existence. By assumption, they differ in number, so that what one of them thinks is not automatically what the other one thinks. Still, they might just happen to think the exact same thing and nothing else. Neither of these two floating humans will be aware of any ties to matter, nor will any of them remember anything they have thought, learned, experienced, or done in the past. Both will have the exact same immaterial attributes. Yet if Avicenna is right, each of them will be aware of her own individual existence, and not of the existence of the other one. If each of them is aware of herself as a distinct individual, whatever renders them distinct should not actually be entirely unknown. Presumably, then, the most fundamental and reliable individuating factor

⁴⁸ *Psychology* V 3, ed. Rahman p. 223, l. 11 – p. 224, l. 20.

⁴⁹ *Psychology* V 3, ed. Rahman p. 226, l. 9-14.

⁵⁰ *Psychology* V 3, ed. Rahman p. 226, l. 16-227,10. Cf. Black, "Avicenna on Individuation, Self-Awareness, and God's Knowledge of Particulars," p. 264-6; Kaukua, *Self-Awareness*, p. 46.

⁵¹ Cf. Black, "Avicenna on Individuation, Self-Awareness, and God's Knowledge of Particulars," p. 259.

will be the fact that each of them is aware of herself, as opposed to being aware of the other one, or of both of them. Their self-awareness is what ultimately guarantees their continued numerical identity.⁵² Therefore, in this case, that by means of which we identify ourselves as individuals is in fact that which causes our intellects to remain numerically the same. This is what Avicenna has in mind when he says, in one of his later writings, that our self-awareness constitutes the very existence of our selves.⁵³

Avicenna's point is that although humans cannot *come to be* numerically one without initially being tied to particular portions of matter, they can *persist* as individuals without retaining any such ties. They can do this because as soon as they exist, they have an awareness of themselves that henceforth constitutes their existence. In this way, they can maintain their numerical identity in the absence of the body.⁵⁴ This, to be sure, does not guarantee that humans can intellect themselves, given that self-awareness need not be the same as self-intellection. But it does make human self-intellection possible. Although the factor that initially rendered a human numerically distinct may not be intelligible, that which enables this human to *remain* numerically distinct in the absence of her body may well be intelligible. If this is so, and if a human intellect may remain numerically distinct for the same reason, disembodied humans should be able to intellect themselves as individuals.

5. CONFLICTING PASSAGES

Still, this cannot be the whole story. There are, to be sure, a couple of passages in Avicenna that tend to confirm that humans do sometimes intellect themselves. Two passages in the *Notes* suggest that awareness of awareness is an act of the intellect, but the soul's intellectual awareness of its awareness is not quite the same as self-intellection.⁵⁵ More to the

⁵² Black ("Avicenna on Individuation, Self-Awareness, and God's Knowledge of Particulars," p. 272) wonders why Avicenna makes no mention of individual intentions (i.e. meanings) in this context. The point might actually be that no such mediating concepts are needed.

⁵³ See *Notes*, ed. Mousavian, [886] p. 482, l. 11, ed. Badawi p. 161, l. 10; *Notes*, ed. Mousavian, [889] p. 483, l. 1, ed. Badawi p. 161, l. 15. Cf. Alwishah, "Avicenna on Self-Cognition and Self-Awareness," p. 155; Kaukua, *Self-Awareness*, p. 51-56.

⁵⁴ Cf. *Investigations*, ed. Bidarfar, [641] p. 216, l. 15-17, ed. Badawi, [258] p. 182, l. 11-12: the soul will continue to be aware of itself after death.

⁵⁵ *Notes*, ed. Mousavian, [329] p. 212, l. 2-3, ed. Badawi p. 80, l. 4; ed. Mousavian, [883] p. 481, l. 12, ed. Badawi p. 161, l. 1-2. Cf. Alwishah, "Avicenna on Self-Cognition and Self-Awareness," p. 161-2.

point, Avicenna says in *Pointers and Reminders* III 19 that all thinkers have “a capacity close to actuality” for intellectioning themselves.⁵⁶ And in *Psychology* V 6 he says that when the soul conceives of itself, it is intellecter, intellected, and intellect at once.⁵⁷ So it looks like there are instances of actual human self-intellection.

However, there are also places where Avicenna clearly implies that only the necessary existent can really intellect itself. In the *Notes*, he says that only the first being, and nothing else, is ever intellecter and intellected at once:

So [the first being] is the intellecter and the intellected. And this judgment holds true of it, and it does not hold true of anything else; for everything else intellects what is external to itself.⁵⁸

Unless a human soul can literally come to be the first being, then, it will never be intellecter and intellected at once. Which is to say that there can be no perfect identity between the human intellect and what it intellects.⁵⁹ But then, it seems that it cannot be its own object.

The passages just listed are not necessarily incompatible. It is conceivable that the human soul has a capacity close to actuality for intellectioning itself, and that if it *were* to exercise this capacity, it would be both intellecter and intellected, but that it actually never exercises it. However, this would be a rather unattractive position for an Aristotelian. Besides, when Avicenna says in *Psychology* V 6 that the soul conceives of itself and that this renders it intellect and intellected, this does not at all sound like a counterfactual scenario.⁶⁰ Also, it seems unlikely that Avicenna has changed his mind, since the *Notes* appear to have been written in between the *Psychology* and the *Pointers and Reminders*.⁶¹ What we have here is therefore the sort of tension that requires a philosophical resolution.

⁵⁶ *Pointers and Reminders* III 19, ed. Forget p. 132, l. 7-8, tr. Inati p. 108; cf. Adamson, “Avicenna and his Commentators,” p. 107-9; Kaukua, *Self-Awareness*, p. 89.

⁵⁷ *Psychology* V 6, ed. Rahman p. 239, l. 7-8.

⁵⁸ *Notes*, ed. Mousavian, [876] p. 476, l. 2-4, ed. Badawi, p. 159, l. 7-8.

⁵⁹ Cf. Black, “Avicenna on Self-Awareness and Knowing that One Knows,” p. 69.

⁶⁰ “The soul conceives of itself (*tataṣawwara dātahā*) and its conception of itself renders it intellect, intellecter, and intellected, ... (ed. Rahman p. 239, l. 7-8).”

⁶¹ Cf. Gutas, *Avicenna and the Aristotelian Tradition*, p. 160-64. It is possible that at least parts of the *Notes* were not actually written by Avicenna (cf. Damien Janos, *Method, Structure, and Development in al-Fārābī's Cosmology*, Brill, 2012, p. 389). Note, however, that *Psychology* V 6 is confirmed by *Notes*, ed. Mousavian [998] p. 573, l. 3 – p. 574, l. 9, ed. Badawi p. 189, l. 24 – p. 190, l. 13, cited below.

6. NOTES [998]

Now consider the following passage from the *Notes*:⁶²

[a] The reason why a thing is intellected is that it is separated (*yatağar-rad*) from matter; and likewise the reason why a thing comes to be an intellecter is that this thing, I mean the intellect, is separated from matter. So when a form that is separated from matter occurs to a form that is separated from matter, this sort of occurrence is an intellection.

[b] Now when the human form is separated [i.e. abstracted] from matter and you have presented it to your soul, your soul is – according to what is said in the *Book on the Soul*⁶³ – an intellecter of what is intellected from this human form.

[c] In general, then, the existence of the form that is separated from matter is its intellectedness, that is, its existence is that it is intellected, for if it is not intellected, it does not exist. Just as the existence of the sensible form is its sensedness, and this is that it is sensed. And just as, if you had presented forms in your mind that are separated from their matters, their existence in your mind would be that you intellect them.

Likewise, when they are separate in themselves, their existence is nothing but that they are intellected. For them to exist is for them to be intellected; so they only exist when they are intellected. And the existence of the first [being] is its intellecting itself, that is, that it intellects itself. For [the first being's] self is separate, so the way in which its self is for it is such that [the first being] intellects [the self]. So the existence of its self is permanent, and its intellecting its self is permanent.

[d] And once the human soul is separated from matter and its existence is for itself, it is an intellecter of itself and an object of intellection for itself; because its self is separated from matter, according to what has become clear.

[e] And its separating self⁶⁴ is not different from its separated essence [f] as paleness, for example, or corporeality, are different from their essences; for both paleness and corporeality exist due to something other than them, I mean due to matter and [an underlying] subject, and the existence of the essence of each one of the two is different from its essence.⁶⁵

⁶² See *Metaphysics* VIII 6, 6-7, Cairo ed. p. 356, l. 16 – p. 357, l. 12, tr. Marmura p. 284-5, for a parallel passage that, however, does not mention human self-intellection.

⁶³ According to Mousavian, this refers to *Psychology* V 6, ed. Rahman p. 239, l. 3-8 (see his edition of the *Notes*, p. 613). This is the passage from V 6 that I refer to in the beginning of the previous section.

⁶⁴ That is, the self that is doing the separating. I read the first occurrence of *المجردة* as “al-muğarrida” (active) and the second as “al-muğarrada” (passive), as suggested by an anonymous reviewer, so as to avoid turning the statement into a tautology (“And its separated *dāt* is not different from its separated *dāt*”).

⁶⁵ Here I translate four occurrences of *dāt* as “essence.” Everywhere else I consistently translate *dāt* as “self.” The term is genuinely ambiguous. In order to get a feeling for

[g] Thus the soul is a knower of itself and known to itself.⁶⁶ And the necessary existent is separate from matter in the highest degree of separation; so its self is not concealed from itself, that is, it is continuous with it and not different from it.⁶⁷

[a] Avicenna begins by emphasizing that intellection is a relation between something immaterial (the intellect) and something immaterial (the object of intellection). If this is so, the soul can only intellect, and only be intellected, when and insofar as it is free from matter.⁶⁸ Things can become free from matter in two ways: (1) in the mind, by a process of abstraction, or (2) in actual reality, as for instance when the intellect is separated from the body after death. Presumably, Avicenna is not suggesting that humans cannot intellect anything before they die, so he must mean that all intellection requires a certain degree of self-abstraction from material things.

[b] Avicenna confirms that the intelligibility of the human soul results from a process of separation. The soul prepares itself for being intellected by separating itself from other things. In a sense, this is normal procedure. Humans prepare objects for intellection by *abstracting* them from their matter. In the present case, however, the idea is that in order to intellect itself, the *subject* of cognition must actually separate itself from its body. This process of separation will not yield a universal meaning or common nature, but rather an abstract *individual*, that is, an individual that has freed itself from matter while retaining its numerical distinctness and identity.

[c] Avicenna then notes that when forms are separated, they do not exist in matter, and that they must therefore exist in some immaterial subject, that is, in an intellect. Separate forms must be intellected to be able to exist in separation.⁶⁹ This means, first, that things that are separate *in themselves*, that is, by their very nature, must be intellected without any further condition. Since the human soul needs to undergo a change in order to be intelligible to itself, it is not intellected in itself.

this ambiguity, think of how Plato uses the phrase “the *F itself*” in order to refer to the *essence* of *F*s.

⁶⁶ *li-dātihi*, so an alternative translation is: “Thus the soul is a knower in itself and known in itself.”

⁶⁷ *Notes*, ed. Mousavian, [998] p. 573, l. 3 – p. 574, l. 9, ed. Badawi, p. 189, l. 24 – p. 190, l. 13. My labels. My translation would be a lot worse were it not for the many helpful suggestions of an anonymous reviewer.

⁶⁸ Cf. *Notes*, ed. Mousavian, [537] p. 315, l. 7, ed. Badawi p. 107, l. 17.

⁶⁹ Cf. Bahmanyār, *Al-tahṣīl*, ed. Mutahhari (Tehran: Dāneshgāh-e Tehrān, 1996), p. 573, l. 11-12.

Second, that a thing is intellected in itself means that it is intellected independently of anything that does not belong to it. There can be no external, contingent conditions such that it would fail to be intellected if these conditions were not met. Whatever makes it an object of intellection must be inseparable from it. In the simplest case, it will in itself be an object of intellection because it inevitably intellects itself.

[d] Next, Avicenna says some remarkably clear things about human self-intellection. He suggests that the human soul can indeed intellect itself to the extent to which it exists in separation from matter. As he remarks elsewhere, we should no longer call it a soul at this point, but, presumably, an intellect.⁷⁰ Earlier in the *Notes*, Avicenna says the following:

The human soul only intellects itself because it is separated, and the souls of animals are not separated, so they do not intellect themselves.⁷¹

This is to say that the human intellect *can* intellect itself, but only if, and then only because, it is separate from matter. Again, this might mean that humans will be able to intellect themselves only after death, or it might mean that even before death, they can intellect themselves if and insofar as they distance themselves from their body (while retaining their numerical identity).

[e] To say that the separating self and its separated essence are the same is to imply that the self renders itself separate and intelligible. This process of self-separation might well be the process that Avicenna describes in *Pointers and Reminders IX*, culminating in a stage where the “knower” abandons her soul and notices herself only insofar as she notices her own noticing. By noticing her soul only insofar as it is noticing, the “knower” confines herself to the part of her soul that constitutes its self-knowledge, leaving behind the part of her soul that is tied to her body.

[f] Avicenna highlights a difference between the separate soul and other separate forms, such as paleness and corporeality. Instances of paleness and corporeality, he says, differ from their own essence, whereas the separate soul does not. Here is one way in which paleness differs from its essence: To know an existing instance of paleness is never the same as knowing the essence of paleness. The essence of paleness is a common nature. It is not particular in itself, and it does not even exist in itself. We know it by grasping an abstract, universal

⁷⁰ *Notes*, ed. Mousavian, [666] p. 376, l. 4, ed. Badawi p. 128, l. 14-16.

⁷¹ *Notes*, ed. Mousavian, [331] p. 212, l. 9-10, ed. Badawi p. 80, l. 8-9.

form in our minds. The separate soul, on the other hand, has separated itself while retaining its numerical identity. It will not only be known in separation from matter, but it will remain numerically one in separation from matter. Therefore, it can intellect itself without any further act of abstraction.

Another difference between the separate soul and an abstract form such as paleness is that whenever paleness is realized, it must be realized in something else. For paleness to be is always for something else to be pale. In this sense, paleness is never in itself. A little later in the *Notes*, Avicenna says that things that are not in themselves are “concealed from” themselves, just as things that are *not in sight* are *concealed from sight*.⁷² By this analogy, paleness is concealed from itself, whereas the separate soul (i.e. the intellect) is not. This suggests, again, that the human intellect can intellect itself.

[g] Finally, Avicenna emphasizes that the necessary existent is separate to the highest possible degree. This suggests that there might be lower degrees of separation,⁷³ and that the more the human intellect separates itself, the more it will be like God. Directly after having suggested that a human intellect *can* be its own object (in section [b]), Avicenna now suggests that *perfect* self-intellection would amount to divine self-intellection.

7. CONCLUSIONS

We have seen two passages from the *Notes* where Avicenna clearly states that only the necessary existent can intellect itself in such a way that intellecter and intellected are identical.⁷⁴ In the passage discussed just now (section [b]), also taken from the *Notes*, Avicenna says in equally clear terms that by separating itself from matter, the human soul can reach a stage where it does intellect itself. How can this tension be resolved? The following consideration might help.

I have argued that individuals are intelligible as such to the extent to which one can intellect that which renders them numerically one. In the case of immaterial individuals, this should in principle be possible.

⁷² Cf. *Notes*, ed. Mousavian, [998] p. 574, l. 9-14, ed. Badawi, p. 190, l. 13-17.

⁷³ This is not to suggest that there is a continuum of degrees of separation. Rather, to be separated to a lower degree might amount to being completely separated from some but not all things, whereas separation to the highest degree is complete separation from all things. Thanks to an anonymous reviewer for bringing this out.

⁷⁴ *Notes*, ed. Mousavian, [876] p. 476, l. 2-4, ed. Badawi, p. 159, l. 7-8; *Notes*, ed. Mousavian, [877] p. 476, l. 6-8; ed. Badawi, p. 159, l. 9-10.

However, that which renders the human intellect numerically distinct cannot lie in the essence of this intellect. The essence of any given intellect is shared by all intellects, it is neither one nor many in itself. Even if the source of its individuality is intelligible, the fact will remain that the intellect needs to intellect more than its own essence in order to intellect itself as this one individual. And if this is so, the subject and the object of human self-intellection will never be perfectly identical. Avicenna ends up agreeing with Aristotle's conclusion after all, without endorsing his premises: The human intellect can intellect itself, as an individual, only by intellecting something other than itself.

Put in a slightly different way, the human soul may be able to intellect the *immediate* source of its numerical identity, namely the sort of self-awareness that the floating human is capable of. The *ultimate* source of its individuality, however, is the necessary existent, that is, the divine intellect. And although we know that the divine intellect is in fact intelligible, because it is intelligible to itself, and although we understand what the phrase "divine intellect" means, this does not mean that the divine intellect is *fully* intelligible to *us*. If the human intellect *could* actually intellect itself in the exact same way in which the divine intellect intellects itself, it would be able to intellect the divine intellect, and therefore the ultimate source of its own individuality. But it cannot do so. The divine intellect intellects itself by default, without preparation, from eternity to eternity, and without intellecting anything beyond itself. The human intellect, on the other hand, will only ever intellect itself after preparation, for a limited time, and by intellecting something more perfect than itself.

This is why Avicenna can say, on the one hand, that humans have a capacity close to actuality for self-intellection (*Pointers and Reminders* III 19),⁷⁵ and that when they conceive of themselves, intellecter and intellected are the same (*Psychology* V 6). Their intellect *can* indeed be an object of its own intellection. Still, humans cannot *exclusively* intellect themselves, such that intellecter and intellected are strictly identical. This is what Avicenna has in mind when he says that only the first being can really intellect itself. Only the first being can exclusively intellect itself, without ever intellecting anything else.

⁷⁵ Note that in other contexts, the phrase "close to actuality" suggests that one need no longer extract a notion from sensory data, but is already prepared for conceiving it and may therefore do so at any time (cf. *Psychology* V 6, ed. Rahman p. 247, l. 13). In the present context, the point is probably that the process of rendering the self intelligible is not the usual one of gathering and abstracting from sense data.

I conclude that according to Avicenna, the human intellect can indeed intellect itself as an individual, that is, as numerically this one intellect. This, however, is an extraordinary achievement, because it is made possible only by a process by which the subject of cognition renders itself intelligible in its individuality. In order to achieve this, the subject of intellectual cognition must do to itself what it usually does to its object. It must separate itself from matter. It can do this while retaining its numerical unity, because the human soul, and with it the human intellect, is rendered particular by factors that are in themselves intelligible. One of these factors is the basic human self-awareness that is highlighted in Avicenna's floating human scenario. This confirms that self-awareness and self-intellection are not the same. Self-intellection is a rare achievement, which the soul needs to prepare for by a process of self-separation. Self-awareness, on the other hand, is constantly with us, and requires no preparation. The other factor that ultimately individuates the human intellect is the divine intellect. And although we know that the divine intellect is intelligible, it remains out of reach for our own intellect. Therefore, the human intellect can intellect itself as numerically one, but only by approximating the intellection of something other than itself.

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