

Averroes' Agent Sense in the 13th Century

Abstract: In *De Anima* III.5, after Aristotle's cryptic discussion of thought or intellect (*nous*) which is what it is by "becoming" or "receiving" all things, Aristotle raises the equally cryptic discussion of thought or intellect which, in contrast, is always active and makes all things intelligible, "and without this nothing thinks"; the former has come to be referred to as the "potential", "passive", or "material" intellect, and the latter as the "active" or "agent" intellect. In Averroes' long commentary (Bk. II, c.60), he provides an argument that an analogous notion of an "agent sense" should be considered which makes objects sensible, in contrast to a passive sense, or senses, which would, in turn, serve as a principle of receiving.

Despite the fact the Averroes' account of an agent sense was already a regular topic of discussion in the 13th century, the existing literature has largely focused on one 14th century proponent of this view: the Arts Master, John of Jandun. But what licences Jandun's positive embrace of an agent sense theory? Part of the puzzle here is that every 13th century figure who has been discussed on this topic, coming from a variety of backgrounds, goes out of their way to object to Averroes' suggested theory; this includes those who, on Aristotelian grounds, ultimately endorse a seemingly passive theory of sensation, such as the Dominican Theologian, Albert the Great, but also those who endorse their own kind of active theory of sensation, drawing from Augustine, such as the Franciscan Theologian, Peter John Olivi. Why so much pushback if truly no contemporary author endorsed this view? Just what is entailed by an Averroist "agent sense" anyways?

For this talk, I will focus on the 13th century discussion of Averroes's agent sense in further detail, especially from Albert, Olivi, and Giles of Rome, with the aim to clarify Jandun's context. As I will explain, each of these figures have their own peculiar points of overlap and contrast in how they object to an agent sense and how they even conceive of such a power. Olivi, e.g., clearly distinguishes his own "Augustinian" active account of sensation from the agent sense account of Averroes; for Olivi, the sense acts in the very act of sensing, not in simply making an object sensible. Albert, on the other hand, treats such an "Augustinian" active theory alongside that of Averroes, and objects to both. Furthermore, Albert and Giles also consider whether the agent sense might simply be a heavenly body, such as the illuminating sun making objects sensible, though both object to such an account nevertheless, in different ways (most interestingly, Giles on the ground that a heavenly body is not a sense). Curiously, despite Olivi's conceptual distinctions, it appears that Jandun follows Albert in blurring these different active theories of sensation together, although his own positive account comes closer to Olivi's in substance. The blending together of Averroes' agent sense with more popular theories of light also helps explain the general popularity of this discussion, prior to Jandun's positive embrace.