Avicenna and the Human Soul as a Mirror: a Myth?

Tommaso Alpina*

A Concetta Luna,
per gli anni pisani

Abstract
In the scholarship on Avicenna's theory of the soul, one frequently comes across the claim that, in the eschatological context, the Persian philosopher compares the human soul with a mirror to refer to the supreme, intellectual beatitude the human soul acquires in the afterlife if appropriately trained during its earthly life. Some scholars have also argued that, in *Nafs* V, 6, Avicenna uses the same comparison in the epistemological context to explain how human intellection works and how the human soul relates to intellectual forms. This reconstruction of Avicenna's argument(s) in *Nafs* V, 6, where the soul-mirror comparison features, is at odds with several doctrinal points of Avicenna's philosophical psychology, and with the textual evidence. Thus, by looking at the text from *Nafs* V, 6 and the broader context to which it belongs, this paper calls into question the claim that the soul-mirror comparison expresses how Avicenna conceives of the relationship between the human soul and intellectual forms. In particular, a close textual inspection reveals that in *Nafs* V, 6, Avicenna uses the soul-mirror comparison to refer to a model for human intellection (i.e., that based on the reflection of a self-subsisting content outside and above the human intellect), which he rejects because he deems it unsuitable to account for how human intellect works.

1. Introduction

In the scholarship on Avicenna's theory of the soul, one frequently comes across the claim that the Persian philosopher compares the human soul with a mirror. In the eschatological context of a few of his works (e.g., *Pointers* and *Reminders* and *On the Rational Soul*), Avicenna uses this comparison to refer to the supreme, intellectual beatitude the human soul acquires in the afterlife if appropriately trained during its earthly life. In this state, the human soul is free from the hindrance and concerns of the body, connects immediately with the lofty intelligences, and acquires universal, intellectual knowledge all at once.[1] In the same eschatological context (usually not in the same works), Avicenna conveys almost the same idea about the state of the human soul in the afterlife through another comparison, that is, that of the soul as an intelligible world (e.g., the *Metaphysics* of *The Cure*). In this case,

* I would like to thank Peter Adamson, Cristina D'Ancona, and the anonymous referees for their invaluable comments on the first draft of this paper, which saved me from many mistakes and inaccuracies. This article has been written under the aegis of the project "The Arabic Roots of European Biology" (AREB, GA 101109485), funded by the European Union under the Action "Horizon-TMA-MSCA Postdoctoral Fellowships – GF 2022".

[1] See Ibn Sīnā, *Le livre des théorèmes et des avertissements*, ed. J. Forget, Brill, Leiden 1892, p. 129.9; p. 204.4; Ibn Sīnā, *Aḥwāl al-nafs*, ed. A.F. al-Ahwānī, Dār iḥyā' al-kutub al-ʿarabiyya, al-Qāhira 1371/1952, p. 196.20.

© Copyright 2024 Pisa University Press Polo editoriale CIDIC – doi: 10.12871/979125608070033

once its bodily desires have been curbed through appropriate training during its sublunary existence, the human soul's contact with the intellectual forms is perfect and instantaneous.[2] Besides acknowledging the use of these two comparisons in the eschatological context, some scholars have ventured to claim that Avicenna uses the soul-mirror comparison also (if not primarily) to account for how the human rational soul performs its peculiar activity, i.e., intellection, in this world, not in the afterlife. According to their reconstruction, through this comparison, Avicenna aims to distinguish the nature of the human material intellect from the nature of matter. Unlike the latter, which is moulded by the form it receives, the former does not receive any impression from the intellectual form of which it thinks, because that form does not inhere in it, but is simply reflected by it.

Avicenna's (alleged) endorsement of such a view, namely that when it thinks, the human material intellect does not receive any intellectual form but, like a mirror, only reflects it, is surprising and problematic for at least three reasons. First of all, if Avicenna claims that intellection is in essence reflection, he will be forced to admit that, like material objects reflected in a mirror, the reflected contents in the intellect, that is, intellectual forms, are self-subsisting entities somewhere outside the intellect, above the sublunary realm, possibly in the celestial region. Consequently, the human material intellect would not have access to the forms themselves but only to their image. Admitting the existence of self-subsisting entities to which intellectual contents correspond in the way an image corresponds to the concrete existing thing would be tantamount to endorsing the existence of Platonic Forms. However, in several places of his oeuvre, Avicenna explicitly engages in refuting their existence.[3]

Secondly, the mirror image not only paves the way to a form of Platonism but is itself Platonic, as its use in Plato's *Timaeus* and the subsequent Greek and Arabic Neoplatonic tradition attests.[4] In the Neoplatonic tradition, one crucial aspect of the comparison is that the mirror reflects only once it is polished free of rust, that is, of concerns with the body. This, in turn, seems to suggest a kind of passive (or default) interpretation of the intellective process, which is typically Neoplatonic: once the bodily hindrance is removed, intelligibles start flowing automatically onto the human intellect from above. Avicenna's theory of human intellection, however, entails a more active epistemology of abstraction.[5]

Lastly, the image of the purification of the mirror from rust conveys an idea of asceticism and contempt for the body and its activities that is foreign to Avicenna's understanding of knowledge acquisition in this world (see the role of abstraction just recalled).

Scholars who have claimed that Avicenna uses the soul-mirror comparison not only in the eschatological context but also in the account of human intellection within his philosophical psychology have grounded their interpretation on a passage from chapter V, 6 of Avicenna's

---

[2] Ibn Sīnā, *Al-Shifāʾ*, *al-Ilāhiyyāt (2)*, eds. M.Y. Mūsā – S. Dunyā – S. Zayed, al-Hayʾa al-ʿāmma li-šuʾūn al-maṭābiʿ al-amīriyya, al-Qāhira 1379/1960, IX, 7.

[3] See, for instance, Ibn Sīnā, *Ilāhiyyāt* VII, 2, which is entitled "[Chapter] on the report of the opinion of the ancient philosophers about the Ideas and the mathematical principles, and the reason calling for this, and the clarification of the origin of the ignorance that befell them, because of which they deviated [from the truth]."

[4] See Plat., *Tim.*, 71 B – 72 C. See also al-Kindī, *Qawl fī l-nafs al-muḫtaṣar min kitāb Arisṭū wa-Falāṭun wa-sāʾir al-falāsifa*, in *Rasāʾil al-Kindī al-falsafiyya*, ed. M.ʿA. Abū Rīda, Dār al-fikr al-ʿarabī, I-II, al-Qāhira 1369-72/1950-53, I, pp. 272-80, in part. p. 276. More in n. 16 below.

[5] See, for instance, *Nafs* II, 2, which is entitled "[Chapter] on the verification of the kinds of perceptions belonging to us."

Book of the Soul (*Kitāb al-Nafs*, henceforth *Nafs*). This is the psychological section of the natural philosophy of his *Book of the Cure* (*Kitāb al-Šifāʾ*, henceforth *Šifāʾ*), where Avicenna does refer to the soul-mirror comparison and discuss its heuristic value in framing his theory of human intellection.

As I have pointed out, Avicenna's use of such a comparison to explain how human intellect works would be at odds with several aspects of his philosophical psychology. This paper will, therefore, call into question his endorsement of the soul-mirror comparison by closely examining the crucial passage from *Nafs* V, 6, and, at the same time, looking at the broader context in which this comparison occurs. This examination will show that Avicenna uses the soul-mirror comparison to refer to a model for human intellection based on the reflection of a self-subsisting content outside the human intellect. We will see, however, that Avicenna rejects this model because it is deemed unsuitable for capturing the relationship between the human material intellect and the intellectual forms. A brief survey of the scholarship on this topic will preface this examination.[6]

2. From Supreme Beatitude to Human Intellection: The Soul-Mirror Comparison in Avicennan Scholarship

In a monograph published in 1986, J. Michot explains God's creative manifestation (*taǧallin*) as the reflection of his image in several hierarchically arranged substances similar to mirrors, starting from the first intellect, which is the most polished mirror, down to the other celestial intelligences, the celestial souls, and our human rational souls. In so doing, Michot expands on a short passage from the *Epistle on Love* (*Risāla fī l-ʿišq*), an early work by Avicenna, where the philosopher uses the image of the mirror to refer only to the way in which the first celestial intellect receives the image of God.[7]

By elaborating further on this passage from the *Epistle on Love*, Michot claims that these mirrors act as different receptacles of the divine creative emanation, to which they aim to assimilate themselves by reflecting what they receive of God in the best possible way. At the same time, they filter the content of their reflection down to the hierarchically lower mirrors (or receptacles). In Michot's words, this model of assimilation (*tašabbuh*) to and reflection of the image (*miṯāl*) of the divine accounts for the different activities in which the various mirrors are engaged, namely the intellection of celestial intelligences, the movement of celestial spheres, the information of sublunary matter, and human intellection.[8]

In the specific case of human intellection, explains Michot, the intellectual forms appearing in the human intellect ("dans l'esprit de l'homme") are the manifestation of the essences in the soul, which owe their existence to the Active Intellect, the tenth and last celestial intelligence, which plays the above-mentioned role of filter between the celestial and

---

[6] Unless otherwise noted, all translations from Arabic are mine. The Arabic text of Avicenna's *Nafs* is quoted from Avicenna (Ibn Sīnā), *De Anima [Arabic Text], being the Psychological Part of Kitāb al-Shifāʾ*, ed. F. Rahman, Oxford U.P., London-New York-Toronto 1959, 1970[2].

[7] J.(Y.) Michot, *La destinée de l'homme selon Avicenne: Le retour à Dieu (maʿād) et l'imagination*, Peeters, Louvain 1986 (Académie royale de Belgique, Classe des Lettres, Fonds René Draguet, 5), in part. p. 90, n. 113.

[8] *Ibid*., pp. 90-2. It is noteworthy that in the texts quoted by Michot, Avicenna speaks of assimilation (*tašabbuh*) to God, whose perfection the entities below it desire to attain through their activities (intellection, in the case of celestial intelligences). However, there he never speaks of any form of representation (or reflection) of an image (*miṯāl*).

the sublunary realms.[9] In outlining Avicenna's account of human intellection, Michot quotes a passage from Avicenna's *The Provenance and Destination* (*Kitāb al-Mabdaʾ wa-l-maʿād*) where the philosopher maintains that the nature of the soul is to become an intelligible world. The image of the soul as an intelligible world, adds Michot, was later to be interpreted by comparison with a mirror by Faḫr al-Dīn al-Rāzī,[10] a comparison that has a distinguished lineage (as we saw in the introduction, in the Arabic tradition, it traces back to al-Kindī).[11]

In his monograph, Michot seems ready to apply the manifestation-reflection paradigm to each level of Avicenna's emanative scheme. In particular, he considers it the best hermeneutic tool for explaining the way in which human intellection works (knowledge through reflection). However, upon a closer inspection, it seems that his illustration of Avicenna's theory of human intellection by means of the soul-mirror comparison applies only to the perfect human soul, that is, to the soul once its relation to matter is severed. This soul enjoys the highest intellectual pleasure in the afterlife (*maʿād*), if it has managed to curb its lower appetites (and powers) during its worldly existence.[12]

Following in the footsteps of Michot, many scholars argued that, for Avicenna, the human rational soul can become a polished mirror, reflecting the totality of the intellectual forms, only in the afterlife, thus taking the soul-mirror comparison as a way to describe the state of the supreme happiness of the human soul after death, which is unattainable in this world due to bodily constraints.[13] However, in a 2008 article, M. Sebti suggested extending the function of the soul-mirror comparison to the interpretation of Avicenna's theory of human intellection.[14]

---

[9] *Ibid.*, p. 96.

[10] *Ibid.*, p. 97, n. 141. In n. 142, Michot refers to a passage from the *On the Rational Soul* (*Risāla fī l-kalām ʿalā l-nafs al-nāṭiqa*). There, Avicenna does use the soul-mirror comparison (*fa-taṣīru l-nafs ka-mirʾā ṣaqīla tanṭabiʿu ṣuwar fīhā l-ašyāʾ*, see *Aḥwāl al-nafs*, p. 196.20 al-Ahwānī). However, the context in which the comparison occurs is that of the perfect state of the human rational soul in the afterlife and its eternal bliss, which the soul experiences if it has accomplished a process of purification through knowledge and good acts (good habits, prayer, etc.) during its worldly existence. This text is translated and commented upon by D. Gutas in his *Avicenna and the Aristotelian Tradition: Introduction to Reading Avicenna's Philosophical Works – Second, Revised and Enlarged Edition, Including an Inventory of Avicenna's Authentic Works*, Brill, Leiden-Boston 2014, pp. 67-75. See also D. Gutas, "Avicenna: The Metaphysics of the Rational Soul", *The Muslim World (Special Issue: The Ontology of the Soul in Medieval Arabic Thought)*, 102.3/4 (2012), pp. 417-25, part. p. 424 (This article is the English abridged version of D. Gutas, "Avicenna: Die Metaphysik der rationale Seele", in T. Kobusch (ed.), *Philosophen des Mittelalters*, Primus Verlag, Darmstadt, 2000, pp. 27-41).

[11] *Ibid.*, p. 99, n. 151.

[12] *Ibid.*, p. 100. See also p. 97, n. 142. The state of the soul when it returns to the heavenly realm is, indeed, the topic to which Michot's monograph is devoted.

[13] See M. Sebti, *Avicenne. L'âme humaine*, Presses universitaires de France, Paris 2000, p. 96; Ead. "La distinction entre intellect pratique et intellect théorique dans la doctrine de l'âme humaine d'Avicenne", *Philosophie* 77 (2003), pp. 23-44. In particular, in this article Sebti connects many times the soul-mirror comparison with the state of the human soul after death (p. 23: "après la mort du corps"; p. 33: "miroir dans l'au-delà"; p. 39: "la seule destinée digne de l'homme"). See also O. Lizzini, *Vie active, vie contemplative et philosophie chez Avicenne*, in *Vie active et vie contemplative au Moyen Age et au seuil de la Renaissance*, ed. Ch. Trottmann, École française de Rome, Roma 2009, pp. 207-39, in part. p. 217, p. 234.

[14] M. Sebti, *Réceptivité et spéculation dans la noétique d'Avicenne*, in D. De Smet – M. Sebti – G. de Callataÿ (eds.), *Miroir et savoir. La transmission d'un thème platonicien des Alexandrins à la philosophie arabo-musulmane*, Presses Universitaires de Louvain, Leuven 2008, pp. 45-171. See also Ead., *Avicenna*, in D. De Smet – M. Sebti (eds.), *Noétique et théorie de la connaissance dans la philosophie arabe du IX^e^ au XII^e^ siècle. Des traductions gréco-arabes aux disciples d'Avicenne*, Vrin, Paris 2019 (Études musulmanes 52), pp. 267-309.

In her reconstruction, the soul-mirror comparison refers neither only nor primarily to the ultimate happiness of the perfected soul in the afterlife but rather to how the human soul conceives universal, intellectual forms in this world. In particular, Sebti argues that Avicenna uses the soul-mirror comparison he found in al-Kindī's writings to mark the difference between the receptivity of matter and the receptivity of the human material intellect and, more importantly, to claim that, while the former is altered and perfected by the form received from the *Giver of Forms* (*Wāhib al-ṣuwar*), the latter is in no way altered or perfected by the intellectual form of which it thinks. While performing its activity, the human material intellect is nothing more than a mirror: it only reflects the intellectual forms, which are in the Active Intellect above it, without being transformed by them. According to Sebti, this perspective perfectly chimes with Avicenna's denial of intellectual memory: the human material intellect cannot store the intellectual forms because these forms are present in it only when it is actually thinking of them. Since the human material intellect is not continuously engaged in the intellectual activity (that being God's prerogative),[15] these forms must be stored elsewhere, that is, in the Active Intellect, which is an intellect in actuality, always thinking of them. Both the first intellection of an intellectual form and its subsequent retrieval would therefore depend almost exclusively on the Active Intellect.

Two problems arise from Sebti's interpretation. The first is a doctrinal problem. In Plato's *Timaeus*, the mirror is an image for matter (or, better, for the receptacle). Comparing the soul to a mirror will amount to comparing it to matter, that is, Platonic matter, which differs from Aristotelian matter. As stressed by Plotinus, like the mirror, matter is not altered or perfected by the "images" in it.[16] How does this comply with the idea Avicenna shares with Aristotle that, unlike images, intellectual forms inhere in the human material intellect and alter it by bringing its capacity for intellection from potentiality to actuality?

The second is a textual problem. Sebti's interpretation is grounded in a passage from *Nafs* V, 6[17] which, according to her, is the only place in Avicenna's oeuvre where the soul-mirror comparison is attested together with the characterization of the intellectual forms as existing in the Active Intellect and the account of the relationship between those forms and the human material intellect as a form of reflection.[18] However, if read in its entirety and appropriately understood, this passage contains an explicit refutation of the idea that, when it conceives intellectual forms, the human soul acts like a mirror.[19] Actually, in this passage Avicenna

---

[15] See *Ilāhiyyāt* VIII, 6.

[16] See C. D'Ancona, "Le rapport modèle-image dans la pensée de Plotin", in De Smet–Sebti–de Callataÿ (eds.), *Miroir et savoir* (above, n. 14), pp. 1-47; C. Steel, "Proclus on the Mirror as a Metaphor of Participation", in De Smet–Sebti–de Callataÿ (eds.), *Miroir et savoir* (above, n. 14), pp. 79-96, in part. p. 89.

[17] In the 2008 paper, the passage is quoted at p. 158, whereas in the 2019 paper, the passage is quoted twice as Text 19 and Text 27 at p. 296 and p. 299. This passage is also quoted in two articles by Anne-Sophie Jouanneau, who argues for an interpretation of Avicenna's account of human intellection similar to Sebti's. See A.-S. Jouanneau, "L'éthique et le miroir de l'âme selon Avicenne", *Sens-Dessous* 20.2 (2017), pp. 57-66, in part. p. 61, n. 7; and Ead., "Le polissage du miroir de l'âme chez Avicenne, Al-Ghazālī et Ibn ʿArabī", *Philosophie* 77.2 (2003), pp. 69-84, in part. p. 77, n. 20.

[18] As Sebti notices, other passages only attest the use of the soul-mirror comparison to refer to the soul's inner, secret self (*sirr*), as in the case of *Pointers and Reminders* (*Kitāb al-Išārāt wa-l-tanbīhāt*), or to the idea of the soul's assimilation (*tašabbuh*) to the intelligible world, as in the case of *The Provenance and Destination* (*Kitāb al-Mabdaʾ wa-l-maʿād*).

[19] This has been already, though briefly, noted by D.N. Hasse, "Avicenna's epistemological optimism", in *Interpreting Avicenna: Critical Essays*, ed. P. Adamson, Cambridge U.P., Cambridge 2013, pp. 109-19, in part. p. 116.

precisely targets the existence of self-subsisting forms like Platonic Forms. What is more, Avicenna makes no reference to the Active Intellect when the soul-mirror comparison is mentioned. Therefore, the reason Sebti offers for this comparison (i.e., explaining the relation of the human material intellect with the intellectual forms contained in the Active Intellect as a form of reflection) cannot stand.[20]

Given the different kind of problems that this interpretation poses, in what follows, I will try to refute it by appealing first to doctrinal and then to textual arguments.

3. The Human Rational Soul Reflects like a Mirror: Myth or Reality?

*3.1 Perfection vs Impassibility (*Maʿādin *II, 2;* Nafs *V, 5-6)*

As we learned, Plato and his followers used the image of the mirror to account for the impassible nature of matter, which is not altered in any way by the "images" of the eternal paradigms reflected in it. In his *Maʿādin wa-Āṯār ʿulwiyya* (*On Minerals and Upper Signs*, henceforth *Maʿādin*),[21] Avicenna upholds a similar position about the impassibility of the mirror: the images reflected in it do not alter the mirror because they neither really inhere, nor subsist, in it. Avicenna is adamant on this point:

> The meaning of imagining (*ḫayāl*) is the following: the sense (*al-ḥiss*) finds the apparition (*šabaḥ*) of something together with the form of something else, just as we find the form of human being together with the form of the mirror. However, that form (*sc.* the first form, i.e., the apparition) is not really impressed on the matter of that second thing, which conveys it and is seen together with it. Likewise, the form of the human being is not really impressed nor subsists in the mirror (*lā takūnu munṭabiʿa bi-l-ḥaqīqa wa-lā qāʾima fī l-mirʾā*); otherwise, the form would truly have a fixed position [in the mirror], and it would not change position because the observer changes position, while the visible thing remains still (II, 2, p. 40.6-10 Muntaṣir-Zāyid-Ismāʿīl, emphasis mine).

---

[20] The excerpt quoted by Sebti is *Nafs* V, 6, pp. 245.13-246.1 Rahman, which she translates as follows: "Ces formes intelligibles sont des entités qui subsistent par soi (*qāʾima fi anfusihā*). Chacune de ces formes est l'espèce d'une entité qui subsiste par soi. L'intellect regarde parfois dans leur direction et s'en détourne d'autre fois. Lorsqu'il regarde dans leur direction, elles sont manifestées (*tamaṯṯalat fīhi*) en lui et lorsqu'il se détourne d'elles, elles ne le sont pas. L'âme est donc comme un miroir et elles sont comme des choses extérieures, qui parfois se reflètent en lui et parfois ne s'y reflètent pas. Il en est ainsi en raison d'une relation (*nisba*) qui existe entre l'âme et ces formes ou [parce que] le principe agent (*al-mabdaʾ al-faʿʿāl*) émane sur l'âme une forme après l'autre en fonction de la demande de l'âme; et qu'il en est de telle sorte que lorsque l'âme se détourne de lui, alors le flux cesse." As I will show in due course, Sebti misinterprets this passage in two places. Firstly, on p. 245.13, the first sentence begins with an *aw* (or), which shows that what is contained in it is not necessarily Avicenna's account, but an alternative among others he is listing (in fact, it is not Avicenna's: he will refute it on p. 247.1-2). Secondly, on p. 245.18, the sentence containing the mention of the Active Intellect is introduced by another *aw* (or), which suggests that this is another alternative to which Avicenna is referring, different from the previous one, where the soul-mirror comparison occurs. Regrettably, Sebti does not translate the first, introductory *aw* and takes the second *aw* as part of the preceding alternative, consequently conflating these two possibilities into one single argument, which would then contain the exposition of Avicenna's genuine position on the topic (the human rational soul acting as a mirror, which reflects the contents of the Active Intellect).

[21] *Maʿādin wa-Āṯār ʿulwiyya* is the fifth section of the natural philosophy of Avicenna's *Šifāʾ*, and corresponds to Aristotle's *Meteorology* I–III. For the edition of the Arabic text, see Ibn Sīnā, *Al-Shifāʾ*, *al-Ṭabīʿiyyāt*, *al-Maʿādin wa-l-Āṯār al-ʿulwiyya*, eds. ʿA. Muntaṣir – S. Zāyid – A. Ismāʿīl – I. Madkūr, al-Hayʾa al-ʿāmma li-šuʾūn al-maṭābiʿ al-amīriyya, al-Qāhira 1385/1965.

Maʿādin II, 2 contains Avicenna's explanation of phenomena such as halos, rainbows, shooting stars, mock suns and the like, which are called imaginings (*ḫayālāt*), that is, optical phenomena, because they do not have actual existence but are the result of seeing the form (shape or colour) of something together with something else on which that form (shape or colour) is reflected (in the case of the rainbow, the colour of the Sun is reflected in multiple drops of water vapour in the clouds, which act as many small mirrors). The sign that these are optical phenomena lacking actual existence is that their position changes in accordance with that of the observer.[22] For our purpose, the relevant part of Avicenna's explanation is the passage in which he maintains that the form reflected in a mirror is not really impressed in it, and thus does not change or alter the mirror in any way. The next step is, then, to ascertain whether Avicenna conceives of the nature of the human rational soul as that of the mirror and the former's relation to intellectual forms as the latter's relation to reflected images.

Avicenna devotes *Nafs* V, 5-6 to the topic of human intellection. *Nafs* V, 5 focuses on the process leading to the first acquisition of an intellectual form (*ṣūra ʿaqliyya*), and the role performed in this process by the human material intellect (*ʿaql hayūlānī*) and the Active Intellect (*ʿaql faʿʿāl*) respectively. *Nafs* V, 6 deals with the relationship existing between the human material intellect and intellectual forms after their first acquisition, the role of the human material intellect and the Active Intellect in the process of retrieving an intellectual form already acquired, and the different degrees of the intellectual faculty in humans (with a reference to the prophet and the specific type of prophecy connected with this faculty). If Avicenna had believed that the human rational soul (via its material intellect) acts like a mirror, which merely reflects intellectual contents without ever actually possessing them and being affected by them, in all likelihood we would have found the endorsement of such a position in his account of how the first intellection of an intellectual form occurs. However, here there are no references to the soul-mirror comparison.

At the beginning of *Nafs* V, 5 we read as follows:

> We say that the human soul is sometimes intellecting in potentiality, then it comes to intellect in actuality. Whatever has proceeded from potentiality to actuality proceeds [from potentiality to actuality] only by a cause in actuality that brings it [into actuality]. Thus, there is here a cause that brings our souls from potentiality to actuality with respect to intelligibles; and since it is the cause for giving the intellectual forms, it can only be an intellect in actuality in which are the principles of intellectual forms in an abstracted way [from matter] (p. 234.14-18 Rahman).

This passage contains the first clue to the fact that Avicenna does not conceive the human soul as impassible like the mirror of the Platonic image. The fact that the intellectual capacity of the human soul passes from potentiality to actuality entails an alteration on the part of the human soul, whose capacity is brought to perfection. The human rational soul is, therefore, not impassible.

Moreover, again in *Nafs* V, 5 Avicenna's account for human intellection confirms that, unlike the mirror, the soul not only is affected by the intellectual forms it receives, it is also

---

[22] On this passage of *Maʿādin* II, 2, see T. Alpina, "Are Colours Always There? Elements in Avicenna's Account of Vision", in K. Ierodiakonou – V. Decaix (eds.), *Colour Theories from Democritus to Descartes*, Routledge, London-New York (forthcoming), pp. 125-45.

not passive because it actively engages in a process of abstraction of the formal core from the imaginative particulars, without which the flow from the Active Intellect does not begin. Avicenna writes:

> When the intellectual faculty looks at the particulars that are in the imagery and the luminosity of the Intellect active upon us, which we have mentioned, shines on them, [these particulars] turn into things abstracted from matter and its appurtenances and are impressed in the rational soul (*wa-inṭabaʿat fī l-nafs al-nāṭiqa*), not in the sense that the particulars themselves move from the imaginative faculty to our intellect, nor in the sense that the notion (*wa-lā ʿalā anna l-maʿnā*) submerged in the [material] appurtenances – [the notion] that in itself and considered from the point of view of its essence is abstracted [from matter] – produces something similar to itself *(yafʿalu miṯl nafsihī*); rather, in the sense that their inspection prepares the soul so that what is abstracted flows onto it from the Active Intellect. For thoughts and reflections are motions that prepare the soul for the reception of the emanation (*qubūl al-fayḍ*) […]" (p. 235.2-9 Rahman, emphasis mine).[23]

This passage contains two crucial elements for our analysis. The first element is the explicit reference to the fact that intellectual forms are impressed (*inṭabaʿat*) in the human rational soul. As we have learned from *Maʿādin* II, 2, Avicenna rules out that reflection entails any form of real impression. Therefore, saying that intellectual forms are impressed in the rational soul is incompatible with having them reflected in it. The second element concerns the possibility that those intellectual forms in the soul are a copy (*miṯl*) of something else. For Avicenna, intellectual forms and imaginative particulars are not linked by a relation of imitation: they just share the same formal core (*maʿnan*), which in the latter case is particularized by material appurtenances. Although here Avicenna is ruling out that intellectual forms are copies of the imaginative particulars, namely of what is lower (not higher) than them in rank, the rejection of the possibility that human intellection entails a form of imitation is nonetheless significant.

The account for human intellection which emerges from *Nafs* V, 5 seems thus to be incompatible with the theoretical implications of the soul-mirror comparison. Human intellection entails the actual impression of intellectual forms in the soul through the combination of abstraction and emanation. This impression, in turn, involves an alteration in the soul, whose capacity for intellection is brought from potentiality to actuality. The account provided in *Nafs* V, 5 jibes with what Avicenna writes about the human theoretical faculty in *Nafs* I, 5.[24] There Avicenna describes the state of acquired intellect (*ʿaql mustafād*), that is, the

---

[23] For a thorough analysis of this passage, see T. Alpina, *Subject, Definition, Activity: Framing Avicenna's Science of the Soul*, De Gruyter, Berlin-Boston 2021 (Scientia Graeco-Arabica series 28), pp. 130-57, and Id., "Intellectual Knowledge, Active Intellect and Intellectual Memory in Avicenna's *Kitāb al-Nafs* and Its Aristotelian Background", *Documenti e studi sulla tradizione filosofica medievale* 25 (2014), pp. 131-83.

[24] *Nafs* I, 5, p. 48.1-2 Rahman: "The theoretical faculty is a faculty such that it is impressed (*an tanṭabiʿa*) with the universal forms abstracted from matter". The same presentation can be found elsewhere in the *Nafs*. See, for instance, *Nafs* V, 1, p. 209.12-13 Rahman: "We must [now] first of all show that this soul [*sc.* the human soul], disposed to receive the intelligibles through the material intellect (*anna hāḏihi l-nafs al-mustaʿidda li-qubūl al-maʿqūlāt bi-l-ʿaql al-hayūlānī*), is neither a body, nor subsisting as a form in a body"; and *Nafs* V, 2, pp. 209.16-210.1 Rahman: "One thing about which there is no doubt is that in the human being, there is a thing, that is, a certain substance that obtains intelligibles by receiving [them] (*yatalaqqā l-maʿqūlāt bi-l-qubūl*). We say that the substance which is the receptacle of intelligibles (*maḥall al-maʿqūlāt*) is in no way a body, nor subsists in a body, either as a faculty in it or as a form belonging to it."

fourth and last degree (*martaba*) of the theoretical faculty, where there is no potentiality and the human intellect is actually thinking of intellectual forms, as follows:

> Sometimes the relation [of the theoretical faculty to the abstracted forms] is the relation of what is *in absolute actuality* (*bi-l-fiʿl al-muṭlaq*), that is, when intellectual forms *are present in it* (*ḥāḍira fīhi*) and it inspects them in actuality. Then, it thinks of them and thinks itself to be thinking of them in actuality. What occurs to it is, therefore, an acquired intellect, and it is called acquired intellect only because, as it will become clear to us (*sc. Nafs* V, 5, p. 234.14-18 Rahman), the intellect in potentiality proceeds to actuality only by means of an intellect which exists always in actuality, and when the intellect in potentiality comes into a sort of contact with that intellect which exists in actuality *a species of the forms acquired from outside is impressed in it* (*inṭabaʿa fīhi*) (p. 50.2-9 Rahman, emphasis mine).

At the beginning of *Nafs* V, 6, in Aristotelian fashion,[25] Avicenna says that the soul is like a place for intellectual forms:

> Certainly, the forms of things inhere in the soul, adorn it, and decorate it *(ṣuwar al-ašyāʾ taḥillu l-nafs wa-tuḥallīhā wa-tuzayyinuhā*). The soul is like a place for them through the mediation of the material intellect (*wa-takūnu l-nafs ka-l-makān lahā bi-tawassuṭ al-ʿaql al-hayūlānī*) (p. 240.6-8 Rahman).

As long as it thinks of them in actuality, these forms actually inhere in the human rational soul through the mediation of the material intellect. Shortly afterwards, Avicenna distinguishes two senses of material intellect, which make clearer that, for him, the material intellect is affected by intellectual forms:

> Similarly, if by *material intellect* one means the absolute disposition of the [human] soul, then it remains in us as long as we are in the body. If, by contrast, one means [by it what] is in accordance with any given thing (*sc.* the disposition to receive something), then the disposition ceases with the existence of actuality[26] (p. 241.1-4 Rahman).

In the quoted passage, Avicenna intends to distinguish the meaning of *material intellect* as the disposition to be affected, which is constitutively proper to the human soul as long as it is connected with the body, from the meaning of *material intellect* as the potentiality to receive particular intellectual content, which is episodically fulfilled, that is, brought to actuality, when the soul is actually thinking of some form. The first meaning refers to the potential, receptive nature that always characterizes the human soul as long as it exists in the sublunary realm, whereas the second meaning refers to the fact that the reception of some form can occasionally actualize the soul's disposition to receive intellectual contents.[27] This distinction serves a specific purpose. On the one hand, it upholds the potential nature of the human material intellect as a faculty of the soul. On the other hand, by contrast, it contends

---

[25] For the idea that the soul is the τόπος εἰδῶν (that is, the place of the forms), see Arist., *De An.* Γ, 4, 429 a 27-28.

[26] The second meaning of 'material intellect' should be compared with what Avicenna says at p. 240.1-3 Rahman: "If the first [thing] has disappeared, then it does not have become another thing, but it has disappeared, and another thing has been realized. Then, how does the soul become the forms of things?".

[27] I stress the occasional (or episodical) character of the actualization of the human material intellect because the only intellect in a state of perpetual actualization is God's (see, for instance, *Ilāhiyyāt* VIII, 6).

that at times, this disposition can be actualized. As we learned from *Nafs* I, 5, when the form is received, the human material intellect reaches the stage of acquired intellect, which is a condition of complete actuality.

This picture is refined when, in *Nafs* V, 6, the acquired intellect is equated with the received intellectual form. Avicenna writes:

> Intellect (*wa-l-ʿaql*) means either (*immā*) the faculty through which [the soul] thinks, or (*aw*) the forms of these intelligibles in themselves […]" (p. 240.16-18 Rahman).

This distinction can be unpacked through what Avicenna adds later on in the same chapter:

> That form (*sc.* the intellectual form) is the truly acquired intellect (*wa-tilka l-ṣūra hiya l-ʿaql al-mustafād bi-l-ḥaqīqa*), whereas this faculty is the intellect in actuality *(al-ʿaql bi-l-fiʿl*) in us insofar as we think. The acquired intellect is the intellect in actuality insofar as it is a perfection (*min ḥayṯu huwa kamāl*) (p. 248.1-4 Rahman).

Here Avicenna distinguishes the acquired intellect which, in the proper sense (*bi-l-ḥaqīqa*), is the intellectual form, and the acquired intellect as our faculty, which coincides with the intellect in actuality. What the human rational soul receives is the intellectual form, which is the acquired intellect/the acquired intelligible in us. When the human rational soul receives it, and it becomes ours, our intellect in potentiality becomes intellect in actuality. It is acquired intellect in the sense that it coincides with the received intelligible, although it is also ours in the sense that it is our potentiality to think that has been actualized. The acquisition of this perfection (the acquired intellect), which helps Avicenna to explain how the human soul is capable of subsequently retrieving a form already acquired, attests to the fact that the human rational soul is affected by the contents it produces in thought.

Ultimately, according to what Avicenna writes, the human rational soul cannot be like the Platonic mirror. Unlike the latter, the former receives an impression from its contents, that is, from intellectual forms, when it thinks of them. This impression results in a change of status in the human rational soul, whose capacity for intellection is brought from potentiality to actuality. Moreover, unlike the passive reflection performed by the mirror, human intellection is an active process, which entails the soul's abstraction of the formal core from the imaginative particulars. In this respect, it is crucial to recall that also in *Nafs* V, 6, the emanation of contents from the Active Intellect is subordinate to the human soul's request (*bi-ḥasab ṭalab al-nafs*, p. 245.19 Rahman).

If, at the doctrinal level, the soul-mirror comparison seems incompatible with Avicenna's account of human intellection, we must now examine the textual evidence scholars brought forward to support their claim according to which Avicenna uses this comparison to explain the relation between the human intellect and intellectual forms.

*3.2 Consider All Your Options: The Soul-Mirror Comparison is Not the Best One (*Nafs *V, 6)*

As pointed out in §3.1, in *Nafs* V, 6 Avicenna deals with the relationship between the human material intellect and intellectual forms already acquired, and how these forms are subsequently retrieved. In this context, Avicenna aims to establish where the intellectual forms already acquired are when the human intellect is not actually thinking of them, since they cannot be stored in the human intellect itself, which otherwise would be constantly thinking of them – and this is not the case.

In *Nafs* I, 5 and IV, 1, Avicenna has argued that, at least in the case of the internal senses, the faculty that perceives must be different from the faculty in which the contents of perception are stored, because one and the same faculty cannot perform both a perceptive and a retentive function.[28] For this reason, there Avicenna singles out two faculties that act as depositories of the contents perceived by the internal senses, that is, imagery (*ḫayāl*, or the form-bearing faculty, *al-muṣawwira*) for forms (*ṣuwar*), and memory (*al-ḥāfiẓa*, or the recollective faculty, *al-mutaḏakkira*) for meanings (*maʿānin*). In the case of intellectual forms, however, finding a suitable candidate for their storage proves to be difficult.

According to Avicenna, the depository of intellectual forms can be neither the body (or a faculty in a body) nor the soul. Unlike the case of internal senses, their depository cannot be a body or a faculty in a body, because intellectual forms are universal. If they were stored in a faculty located in a bodily substratum (like imagery or memory, which are located in the cerebral ventricles), intellectual forms would acquire determinations like position (*waḍʿ*), and therefore cease to be universal. Like any form inhering in matter, they would become particular.[29]

The depository of intellectual forms cannot be the human soul either. Its immateriality, which Avicenna has demonstrated in *Nafs* V, 2, is compatible with being a depository for universal intellectual forms; however, as we learned in §3.1, intellectual forms are in the human soul only as long as it thinks of them. If they were stored in it, the soul would ceaselessly think of them. This option is therefore equally untenable.[30]

At this point, Avicenna suggests two more answers to the question about the depository of intellectual forms. The passage which provides these two solutions is worth quoting in full:

> [(i)] *Either* (*aw*) we say that these intellectual forms are self-subsisting things (*umūr qāʾima fī anfusihā*), of which every form is the species of a self-subsisting thing, and the intellect looks at them at one time, and does not heed them at another [time]. When it looks at them, they are represented in it (*tamaṯṯalat fīhi*), whereas, when it turns away from them, they are not represented (*lam tatamaṯṯal*) [in it]. Then, the soul would be like a mirror (*fa-takūnu l-nafs ka-mirʾā*), whereas the intellectual forms would be like external things, which sometimes appear in it, and sometimes do not appear. This will happen in accordance with the relations existing between the soul and them (*sc.* the intellectual forms). [(ii)] *Or* (*aw*) the active principle emanates on the soul one form after [another] form in accordance with the request of the soul and, when it turns away from it the emanation is interrupted. But

---

[28] See *Nafs* I, 5, p. 44.9 Rahman; IV, 1, p. 165.11-13 Rahman. See also *Qānūn fī l-ṭibb*, 5 vols., Maʿhad tārīḫ al-ṭibb wa-l-abḥāth al-ṭibbiyya, New Delhi 1981–96, I, i, vi, 5, p. 128.20-21. For an introduction to Avicenna's theory of internal senses and an analysis of these passages, see T. Alpina, "Retaining, Remembering, Recollecting: Avicenna's Account of Memory and Its Sources", in V. Decaix – C. Thomsen Thörnqvist (eds.), *Memory and Recollection in the Aristotelian Tradition: Essays on the Reception of Aristotle's De memoria et reminiscentia*, Brepols Publishers, Turnhout 2021 (Studia Artistarum 47), pp. 67-92.

[29] *Nafs* V, 6, p. 245.9-13 Rahman: "We have already said (*sc. Nafs* V, 2) that their (*sc.* of the souls) body and what is connected with their body is among the things that are not appropriate for this (*sc.* for acting as a depository), since it is not appropriate [for the body] to be the receptacle of the intelligibles, nor is appropriate for the intellectual forms to have a position, but their contact with the body would make them have a position. If in the body they become provided with a position, then it is false that they are intelligible".

[30] *Nafs* V, 6, p. 246.3-5 Rahman: "For it is impossible for us to say that this form exists in the soul in complete actuality, nor that [the soul] thinks of it in complete actuality, since the meaning of the soul's intellection of it is only that the form exists in the soul".

> if this is the case, then why does not every return [of a form already acquired to the soul] need a learning anew? We say that the truth is *the final option* (*fa-naqūlu inna l-ḥaqq huwa l-qism al-aḫīr*) (pp. 245.13-246.3 Rahman, emphasis mine).

Once the passage is translated so as to acknowledge the value of the two disjunctive conjunctions (*aw…aw…*, *or…or…*), one immediately realizes that there is little, if any, textual evidence to support the claim that Avicenna's favorite model for explaining the soul's relation to intellectual forms is the one the soul-mirror comparison suggests.[31] This comparison features in only one of two options that Avicenna offers as possible answers to the issue of the depository of intellectual forms already acquired. However, as the end of the passage confirms, this is not the solution Avicenna favors. And it could not have been otherwise. Avicenna cannot uphold such a position, because conceiving intellectual forms as self-subsisting entities would have led him to admit the existence of something very close to Platonic Forms, which he explicitly refutes in *Ilāhiyyāt* VII, 2. Actually, in *Nafs* V, 6 Avicenna does not even engage in the refutation of this solution, but briefly refers the reader to his *Metaphysics*, where a thorough examination and explicit rebuttal of Platonic Forms is found:

> We shall also show later on in the first philosophy (*fī l-ḥikma al-ūlā*, *sc. Ilāhiyyāt* VII, 2) that this form does not subsist isolated (*anna hāḏihi l-ṣūra lā taqūmu munfaridatan*, *sc.* this intellectual form does not exist as an independent entity, outside the Active Intellect)" (p. 247.1-2 Rahman).

For Avicenna, the only valid option is the last one listed in the aforementioned passage, according to which intellectual forms derive from the active principle, i.e. from the Active Intellect, following the request of the human soul, that is, the human soul's activity of abstraction.[32] Hence, the emanation of these contents stops when the human soul directs its attention towards something else. Later on, in *Nafs* V, 6, Avicenna confirms that this is the position he favors.[33] It is, therefore, clear that in *Nafs* V, 6 Avicenna does not combine the reference to the soul-mirror comparison with the reference to the Active Intellect in one single argument. Those references occur in two different contexts, which provide two different answers to the issue of the depository of intellectual forms already acquired: either they are independent, self-subsisting entities like Platonic Forms, which exist outside the Active Intellect, or they are in the Active Intellect, which is constantly thinking of them. For Avicenna, the latter solution is preferable to the former.

Avicenna then concludes his exposition by explaining why the retrieval of an intellectual form already acquired does not involve a new process of abstraction on the part of the human soul. The first acquisition (*al-taʿallum al-awwal*) of a certain intellectual form is like the cure of an eye disease, says Avicenna. When the eye is cured, it is in a state in which it can grasp the form of a certain visible object whenever it wishes; and if it turns away from that visible object, it becomes potentially visible in a way that is very close to actuality. Similarly, when the human intellect acquires a specific form for the first time and then turns away from it, it is

---

[31] For a different translation and understanding of this passage, see n. 20 above.

[32] On the combination of abstraction and emanation in the process leading to the first acquisition of an intellectual form, see Alpina, *Subject, Definition, Activity* (above n. 23), pp. 146-55.

[33] *Nafs* V, 6, p. 247.2 Rahman: "Hence, the valid option (*al-qism al-ṣaḥīḥ*) remains the final one (*al-qism al-aḫīr*)".

sufficient to reconsider the form so that the human intellect immediately establishes a contact with the Active Intellect, where intellectual forms exist in perpetuity. The first acquisition of that form through a combination of abstraction and emanation is the only training the human soul needs to make contact with the Active Intellect and cause that form to flow again from it onto itself whenever it wishes.[34]

4. Conclusion

In some places of his oeuvre, Avicenna compares the soul with a mirror. In most cases, this comparison refers to the state of the human rational soul in the afterlife, when it is separated from the body. In that condition, the soul is purified from any bodily contamination, gains immediate access to intellectual knowledge, and therefore reaches its supreme beatitude. In the eschatological context, the human soul is sometimes compared to an "intelligible world", as happens in the *Metaphysics* of *The Cure*.[35] For this reason, in the post-Avicennan philosophical tradition, both comparisons circulate together, one illuminating the other. In one case, that is, in *Pointers and Reminders*, the soul-mirror comparison occurs twice.[36] Apart from the metaphysical context, Avicenna makes use of it to refer to the two faces (or sides) of the human soul, one facing upwards, towards the intellectual, celestial side, the other directed downwards, towards the sensible side (as the use of the verb *ḥāḏā* seems to suggest), without however committing himself to any specific model of knowledge acquisition.[37]

One occurrence of the soul-mirror comparison has received comparatively more attention than the others; that is, the one attested in *Nafs* V, 6. Some Avicennan scholars considered the soul-mirror comparison in *Nafs* V, 6 a unicum. For, it occurs not in the usual eschatological context but, rather, within his account of human intellection and the relationship between the soul and intellectual forms. These scholars have consequently tried to justify this change of scenario by claiming that, through this comparison, in the epistemological context, Avicenna wanted to suggest that, when it thinks, the human rational soul acts like a mirror: it does not receive any impression from intellectual forms, but only reflects them. According to this reconstruction of Avicenna's use of the soul-mirror comparison in the epistemological context, intellectual forms exist in the Active Intellect above the human rational soul, which passively reflects these intellectual contents when it turns towards them without receiving any actual impression from them.

---

[34] *Nafs* V, 6, pp. 245.5-246.13 Rahman; pp. 247.2-248.8 Rahman. For more on this see in Alpina, *Subject, Definition, Activity* (above n. 23), pp. 155-7.

[35] See *Ilāhiyyāt* IX, 7, pp. 425.15-426.4 Mūsā–Dunyā–Zayed. Avicenna refers to this chapter as the appropriate place to discuss this topic in *Ilāhiyyāt* VIII, 7, p. 370.1-7 Moussa–Dunyā–Zayed.

[36] See n. 1 above.

[37] Here, I do not agree with M. Sebti. She seems to merge the meaning of the first form of the verb (*ḥaḏā*, to imitate) with the meaning of the third form (*ḥāḏā*, to stand opposite, to face), which Avicenna uses in this passage. For this reason, I do not believe that Avicenna is suggesting that, like a mirror, the soul reflects the image of the intellectual contents present in the Active Intellect. I think that here Avicenna is simply using the soul-mirror comparison to describe how the face of the soul, like a mirror, can be turned from the lofty realm to the earthly realm and, consequently, get qualitatively different impressions from the two, without saying anything on how the cognitive process comes about. If Sebti were right, that is, if, by referring to the mirror, Avicenna were suggesting a model based on reflection, then this model should be applied to the lower forms of perceptions as well, which Avicenna also mentions in this context. For Sebti's interpretation, see Sebti, *Réceptivité et spéculation* (above n. 14), p. 150.

As this paper has tried to show, the interpretation of Avicenna's account of intellectual knowledge through the soul-mirror comparison in *Nafs* V, 6 is problematic both at the doctrinal and at the textual level.

At the doctrinal level, this interpretation is at odds with Avicenna's account of human intellection, where the human intellect is not purely passive like the mirror but triggers the process of knowledge acquisition through abstraction (*Nafs* V, 5-6). Moreover, unlike the mirror, which is impassible, the human intellect is affected by intellectual forms, which bring its potentiality for intellection to actuality (*Nafs* I, 5; V, 5-6). Lastly, Avicenna's endorsement of self-subsisting intellectual forms above the human soul would conflict with his explicit refutation of the existence of Platonic Forms (*Ilāhiyyāt* VII, 2), which, by contrast, seems to play a crucial role in the model for intellection behind the soul-mirror comparison. I stress one more time that in the context of the soul-mirror comparison, intellectual forms are self-subsisting entities and not intellectual contents in the Active Intellect.

At the textual level, the passage from *Nafs* V, 6 on which Avicennan scholars ground their reconstruction does not support their claim. First of all, the soul-mirror comparison and the reference to the Active Intellect occur in two distinct arguments, which Avicenna offers as alternative answers to the issue of the depository of intellectual forms already acquired. Secondly, the argument in which the soul-mirror comparison features is just one possibility among others, which Avicenna never upholds. In fact, he explicitly rejects it in the very same chapter.

It is, therefore, safe to conclude that, in *Nafs* V, 6, Avicenna does not use the soul-mirror comparison to account for how the human rational soul relates to intellectual forms via the material intellect.