

# THE ATTRACTION OF AVERROISM IN THE RENAISSANCE: VERNIA, ACHILLINI, PRASSICIO

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Averroes' theory of the unicity of the intellect, or, more precisely, the unicity of the material intellect, was the most controversial thesis of Arabic philosophy in the Renaissance. Since the studies of Renan, Nardi, Di Napoli, Schmitt and Kessler<sup>1</sup> we have grown accustomed to the fact that the unicity thesis was at the same time popular and infamous in the Renaissance: Averroes was castigated for his thesis by many humanist authors from Petrarca to Vives, it was condemned by church officials such as bishop Pietro Barozzi of Padua in 1489,<sup>2</sup> and nevertheless it was embraced by the so-called 'Paduan Averroists', the young Nicoletto Vernia, the young Agostino Nifo, the young Pietro Pomponazzi. I think we silently welcome as a rational move that the elder Vernia, the elder Nifo and the elder Pomponazzi turned against Averroes on this particular matter. The theory seems 'the most flagrant nonsense', *maxima fatuitas*, as Pomponazzi put it.<sup>3</sup>

It is, however, inconceivable and historically unlikely that the theory was supported by many and major philosophers without its having a specific philosophical attraction for them. In modern scholarship, a few attempts have been made to pinpoint in a general philosophical manner the advantages of Averroes' intellect theory. Arthur Hyman characterized the thesis as 'an intermediate position' between Alexander of Aphrodisias and Themistius, in that Averroes makes the material intellect incorporeal, but insists 'at the same time, that thinking requires a corporeal component as well'.<sup>4</sup> For Oliver Leaman, Averroes' theory is designed to provide 'some sort of a metaphysical assurance of the truth and accuracy' of human knowledge of the world.<sup>5</sup> It must have been reasons of this kind that played a historical role in the reception of Averroes in the Renaissance.

<sup>1</sup> Renan 1949, cap. III; Nardi 1958; Di Napoli 1963; Schmitt 1984 and Schmitt 1983, cap. I and II; Kessler 1988.

<sup>2</sup> Barozzi, *Edictum contra disputantes de unitate intellectus*, ed. Ragnisco 1890/91, 279: 'Mandamus ut nullus vestrum sub pena excommunicationis late sententiae quam si contrafaceritis ipso facto incurratis, audeat vel presumat de Unitate intellectus quovis quaesito colore publice disputare; et si hoc ex Aristotelis sententia fuisse secundum Averroin hominem doctum quidem sed scelestum'. On Barozzi and his decree see Di Napoli 1963, 185-188; Gios 1977, 291-303; Monfasani 1993, 250-251, 264-266; Grendler 2002, 283-285.

<sup>3</sup> The statement comes from Pomponazzi's Paduan lectures on the soul of 1503/04, which predate his most famous treatise *De immortalitate animae* of 1516; see Pomponazzi, *Questio de immortalitate anime*, ed. Kristeller 1955, 93: 'Remoto lumine fidei ego valde perplexus sum in materia ista. Contra Alexandrum multum valet argumentum illud de universali. De opinione autem Averrois mihi videtur quod fuerit opinio Aristotelis, tamen nullo pacto possum illi adherere, et videtur mihi maxima fatuitas. Dicat autem quisque quicquid vult, ego magis abhorreo opinionem Averrois quam diabolum'. Cf. for a different student's report of the same lecture: Poppi 1966-70, vol. II, 42: 'Ego credo quod opinio illa sit <in>imaginabilis, fatua ac chimerica'.

<sup>4</sup> Hyman 1981, 176.

<sup>5</sup> Leaman 1988, 100.

The present study investigates the philosophical motives of three partisans of Averroes: Nicoletto Vernia (d. 1499), Alessandro Achillini (d. 1512) and Luca Prassicio (d. 1533). It arrives at conclusions which are meant to counterbalance the prevailing explanations of the success of Averroism in the Renaissance. In modern scholarship, this success has been explained either as a continuation of a thriving medieval current,<sup>6</sup> or as the success not of the philosopher Averroes, but of the commentator on Aristotle, who had long entered the university curricula,<sup>7</sup> or as a result of the specific sociological conditions of the Italian universities, which offered a secular milieu not controlled by theological authorities.<sup>8</sup> This last factor certainly was of some importance, even though it shall be argued that it was not as decisive as the doctrinal attraction discussed in this paper. The first two explanations, however, cannot convince. Even if one does not accept the thesis that there was no Averroism in the thirteenth century,<sup>9</sup> one will have to admit that medieval Averroism did not develop into a doctrinal current or school, the partisans of which clearly profess themselves.<sup>10</sup> It is only in the Renaissance that the unicity thesis becomes the signature of a fully-fledged current. One indication is that in the Renaissance the true interpretation of the party's leader, Averroes, becomes a matter of dispute, as the example of Luca Prassicio will show.

Averroes' theory of the intellect is difficult to understand, and, unfortunately, it is very likely that we will never be able to solve all the textual riddles involved, because the most crucial text, Averroes' long commentary on Aristotle's *De anima*, has not survived in Arabic, but only in a thirteenth-century Arabic-Latin translation.<sup>11</sup> Two important chapters exist also in a Renaissance Hebrew-Latin translation by Jacob Mantino.<sup>12</sup> With respect to the unicity thesis, the most pertinent passage is the long digression contained in commentary III.5. Renaissance philosophers referred to this text as *digressio magna*, or simply as *commentum magnum*. It comments on Aristotle's *De anima* Γ.4, 429a21-24. Averroes here rejects the positions of previous commentators on the human intellect, especially of Themistius and Alexander of Aphrodisias. Themistius is criticized for holding that both the material intellect and the comprehended intelligibles are eternal, while Alexander is rejected for his theory of a human intellect which is generated and corruptible.<sup>13</sup> Averroes' own position starts with the assumption, shared by Themistius, that for Aristotle the material intellect is pure potentiality to receive intelligible forms, and therefore must be

<sup>6</sup> Renan 1949, cap. III,1, 248: 'L'Université de Padoue mérite une place dans l'histoire de la philosophie, moins comme ayant inauguré une doctrine originale que comme ayant continué plus longtemps qu'aucune autre école les habitudes du moyen âge. La philosophie de Padoue, en effet, n'est autre chose que la scolastique se survivant à elle-même et prolongeant sur un point isolé sa lente décrépitude'.

<sup>7</sup> Cranz 1976, 120: 'Again it is to be noted that Averroes appears not so much as the exponent of a specific philosophic position but rather as part of the general learning of the times'. Cf. Kristeller 1965, 113-115.

<sup>8</sup> Kristeller 1965, 112; Monfasani 1993, 249-256. Cf. Kraye 1993, 16: 'In Italian universities the study of philosophy was propaedeutic to medicine rather than, as in Oxford and Paris, theology. This encouraged an atmosphere in which philosophy could operate as an autonomous discipline, guided solely by rational criteria'.

<sup>9</sup> Van Steenberghen 1991, 354-59, who argues that the doctrinal movement is more fittingly described as 'heterodox Aristotelianism'; but see Steel 2001 on Siger of Brabant's fascination for Averroes.

<sup>10</sup> For a sober evaluation of the current discussion of medieval Averroism see S. Ebbesen in Craig 1998, s.v. 'Averroism' (with bibliography). Whether the Bolognese philosophers of the early fourteenth century surveyed by Kuksewicz form a doctrinal current whose principal characteristic is the unicity thesis, still awaits proper investigation; see Kuksewicz 1968.

<sup>11</sup> Edited in Crawford 1953; hereafter Averroes, *Commentarium magnum*. A few Arabic fragments in Hebrew letters have been preserved, which are being prepared for edition by Marc Geoffroy (Paris).

<sup>12</sup> Printed in: Aristotle/Averroes, *Opera omnia* (Venice 1550/52), vol. 5, f. 160v-166v and f. 175r-180r.

<sup>13</sup> Averroes, *Commentarium magnum*, III.5, 391, lin. 127-140, and 393, lin. 176-195 (on Themistius), 395, esp. lin. 228-235 (on Alexander).

incorporeal and eternal.<sup>14</sup> The material intellect is the ontological place and receiver of the intelligible forms, but not the medium through which the human being is joined to the intelligible, since this role is taken by the actualized imaginative forms: we comprehend the intelligibles via the faculty of imagination.<sup>15</sup> Hence, in contrast to Themistius, Averroes insists that the intelligibles are comprehended individually insofar as they have their epistemological basis (*subiectum*) in imagination. They are eternal only with respect to their ontological basis, the material intellect, which is incorporeal.<sup>16</sup>

This is Averroes' theory of the intellection of material forms abstracted from matter. In a second digression, chapter III.36, which corresponds to Γ.7, 431b16-19 in modern editions, Averroes argues that the human intellect gradually gets to know the separate intelligences, that is, the immaterial forms. The human intellect in this process is conjoined with the separate active intellect. When this contact (*coniunctio*, probably a translation of *ittiṣāl*) reaches perfect actualization, the human being knows in god-like manner everything that is.<sup>17</sup>

For the purpose of the argument of the present paper, it is not necessary that the intricacies of Averroes' theory are discussed in greater detail.<sup>18</sup> What is important to see is that Averroes developed his own position in order to avoid several unhappy consequences which previous commentators did not account for. In his own view, his theory had the following advantages: it takes seriously Aristotle's claim in *De anima* Γ.4 that the (material) intellect is pure potentiality and unmixed with the body; it explains universal intellection with a theory of abstraction by the faculty of imagination, rather than with a theory of a mere reception of eternal intelligibles through the material intellect, as did Themistius; it explains how individual intellection is possible even though the material intellect is incorporeal. But what was it that Averroes' Renaissance readers found attractive about the theory?

#### I: Nicoletto Vernia

In the eyes of bishop Barozzi and of present-day scholarship, Nicoletto Vernia (1420-1499) was the Averroist of his time and place, i.e. of the 1480s in Northern Italy. Barozzi in 1489 decreed 'that no one under pain of excommunication... dares or presumes to publicly discuss in any kind of question style the unicity of the intellect'.<sup>19</sup> There is much evidence that this decree was directly aimed at Vernia. That Vernia had indeed defended the unicity thesis, is known from an unpublished *Quaestio* of his, which dates to ca. 1480 and is entitled: *Utrum anima intellectiva...*

<sup>14</sup> Averroes, *Commentarium magnum*, 387, lin. 23, – 388, lin. 56.

<sup>15</sup> Averroes, *Commentarium magnum*, 404, lin. 500, – 405, lin. 520. To quote only lin. 513-520: 'Et cum declaratum est ex praedictis dubitationibus quod impossibile est ut intellectum (*i.e. the intelligible*) copuletur cum unoquoque hominum et numeretur per numerationem eorum per partem quae est de eo quasi materia, scilicet intellectum materialem, remanet ut continuatio intellectorum cum nobis hominibus sit per continuationem intentionis intellectae cum nobis – et sunt intentiones imaginatae – scilicet partis quae est in nobis de eis aliquo modo forma'.

<sup>16</sup> Averroes, *Commentarium magnum*, 400, lin. 379-393, and 401, lin. 419-423.

<sup>17</sup> Averroes, *Commentarium magnum*, III.36, 496-501.

<sup>18</sup> There have been two significant attempts in modern scholarship to make sense of Averroes' long commentary on *De anima*: the English translation and interpretation of an essential passage by Arthur Hyman, and the French translation and interpretation by Alain de Libera. See Hyman 1981, 161-91 (the translation is in Hyman and Walsh 1973, 327-34); de Libera 1998. An English translation of the entire long commentary on *De anima* is being prepared by Richard C. Taylor. Further literature on Averroes' unicity thesis: Davidson 1992, 258-298; Taylor 1998, 92-102; Ivry 1995 and Ivry 2002, xiii-xxix. See also Richard C. Taylor's paper in the present volume.

<sup>19</sup> See n. 2 above.

*eterna atque unica sit in omnibus hominibus.*<sup>20</sup> After Barozzi's intervention, Vernia distanced himself publicly from Averroes in a treatise which he wrote in 1492 (first published in 1504): *Contra perversam Averrois opinionem de unitate intellectus*.

This recantation has given Vernia a bad reputation among historians of philosophy. Bruno Nardi and Eugenio Garin, for instance, were not convinced of the honesty of Vernia's public turn against Averroes and accused him of lack of faith and unscrupulousness (*spregiudicatezza*).<sup>21</sup> John Monfasani pointed to several indications that Vernia was put under financial and inquisitorial pressure by Barozzi.<sup>22</sup> In recent years, Edward Mahoney and Eckhard Kessler have argued that Vernia's anti-Averroist turn was provoked less by Barozzi than by his reading of the Greek commentators<sup>23</sup> and, as Kessler put it, by the desire to restore the original Aristotle.<sup>24</sup> To understand Vernia's intellectual development and his Averroism, we must turn to the early *Questio* of 1480, which has received little attention; it is extant only in one manuscript in Venice.<sup>25</sup>

The *Questio* was originally designed to consist of three sections, as Vernia explains in the first paragraph: the first section, which turns out to be extremely short, is concerned with Plato's position on the eternity and unicity of the intellective soul (which Vernia finds false), the second section deals with Aristotle's opinion on the topic according to the best Greek and Arabic commentators, the third section is devoted to the Latin commentators and the true doctrine of the Christian faith. The manuscript, however, does not contain such a third part. Vernia explains that he had to change his plans because of illness and of heavy teaching duties, and it is possible that the third section was never written. Perhaps Vernia was not interested in elaborating on the topic, that is, on the true doctrine of the Church. This would fit with the fact that the treatise contains many provocative refutations of Christianizing interpretations of Aristotle. But one should also note that Vernia at the opening of the treatise explicitly confronts the *opiniones* of Plato and Aristotle with the *veritas* of Christian faith in this matter.

'Acutissimus Averroes', as Vernia calls him, is described as holding that the intellective soul is eternal and one in all human beings. The soul is conjoined to the human body not as substantial form but like a captain to his ship or an intelligence to its sphere. The second part of the treatise (as it is transmitted) is devoted to a demonstration that this thesis is in fact Aristotle's, while the first part surveys a series of arguments against Averroes which allegedly are irrefutable (and have in fact not been refuted by John of Jandun), but which can be refuted as Vernia sets out to show. It is in this first part, the defense of Averroes, that Vernia's own theory of the intellective soul is most apparent. The combination of Vernia's scattered replies to Averroes' opponents delivers the following picture of his philosophical standpoint:

<sup>20</sup> Further evidence for his views on the unicity thesis can be drawn from Vernia's annotations on a copy of John of Jandun's *De anima*, printed in 1473 and now at the Biblioteca Universitaria at Padua. As Mahoney 2000, art. IV, 591 has shown, the annotations seem to suggest that Vernia understood Averroes and Aristotle to hold that there is but one substance that is both possible and active intellect – which is reminiscent of Vernia's earlier idea of an eternal conjunction of possible and active intellect (discussed below).

<sup>21</sup> Garin 1961, 293: 'Esponente caratteristico dell'aristotelismo averroizante, e noto per la sua sprejudicatezza e miscredenza, Nicoletto Vernia è figura die insegnante ancora da illustrare nel suo peso effettivo'; Nardi 1958, 95-114.

<sup>22</sup> Monfasani 1993, 250, n. 21.

<sup>23</sup> Mahoney 2000, art. III, 144-63.

<sup>24</sup> Kessler 1994, 281.

<sup>25</sup> See the descriptions of the manuscript (MS Venice, Biblioteca Marciana, Cod. Lat. VI, 105, ff. 156r-160v) in Pagallo 1966 and Mahoney 2000, art. III, 145-49.

On the relation between body and soul: the union between soul and body is loose, but of such a degree that it suffices for a unified act of intellection.<sup>26</sup> On the relation of the unique intellect to the individual: the individuality of intellection cannot be explained by reference to the phantasmata, but by comparing the unicity of the intellect to the unicity of species and genera: two human beings do not add anything real to the species human being, and likewise the same opinion or the same intellect in two different persons does not add anything real to the one intellect.<sup>27</sup> On the ontological status of the unique intellect: the human intellect operates eternally and without dependency upon a body, insofar as it is eternally united with the substance of the active intellect.<sup>28</sup> But this is true only with respect to the human species. The individual human being as such always depends upon the phantasmata.<sup>29</sup> In the most highly developed phase of intellection, the possible intellect knows all speculative intelligibles eternally and is thus completely united with the active intellect.<sup>30</sup>

What is curious about this position is that Vernia does not make much use of Averroes' technical terminology and that he does not draw on Averroes' arguments in favour of the unicity thesis, as offered in chapter III.5 of the long commentary on *De anima*: for instance on the argument that if the intellect was multiplied, it would be a faculty in the body, or that it would not know universal intelligibles (an argument which will impress Pomponazzi),<sup>31</sup> or that a pupil would not be able to learn from a teacher. It seems that Vernia was less taken by the epistemological advantages of the theory than by its ontology. This is indicated already by Vernia's heading question: 'Whether the intellective soul ... is eternal and one in all human beings'. For Vernia, the possible intellect is eternal and is eternally united with the active intellect with respect to the human species. This latter idea departs from Averroes, who had argued that the contact (*coniunctio*) between active and speculative intellect is not eternal, but constantly growing along with the intellectual progress of the individual human being. Vernia likens the possible intellect to a separate intelligence, which has eternal

<sup>26</sup> Vernia, *Questio*, MS Venice, f. 156rb: 'Ad quod dicitur quod licet illud tale agregatum non sit unum tanta unitate, quanta unitate est unum compositum ex materia et forma extensa, est tamen unum tanta unitate quod illa sufficit ad operationem unam'.

<sup>27</sup> Vernia, *Questio*, MS Venice, f. 156va: 'Item si assensus contrariorum non erunt contrarii quia adversis fantasmatis dependeant, sequeretur quod idem homo assentire posset et non assentire cuilibet (?) propositioni. ... Ideo dicitur (?) aliter quod illi assensus sunt contrarii et quod sunt in uno et eodem numero cuius unitas nihil reale superaddit unitati speciei'.

<sup>28</sup> Vernia, *Questio*, MS Venice, f. 157vb-157bis ra: 'Puto quod intellectus noster habet operationem sibi propriam et inseparabilem et eternam, hoc est, intellectum agentem sibi unitum qui semper est unitus scilicet intellectui possibili. Et hoc intelligo respectu speciei totius humane scilicet eternaliter habere operationem inseparabilem, dicitur autem propriam habere operationem eternam quia non dependit in operatione eterna ab hoc vel ab illo corpore, dependit tamen ab aliquo corpore in illo et a tota specie. Unde ista intellectio potest dici eterna ipsi intellectui respectu humane speciei', and f. 157bis rb: 'Dico igitur secundum Averroem quod intellectus possibilis ab eterno intellexit agentem, non tamen per suam substantiam, cum ipse, ut colligitur ab Averrois tertio de anima textu commentarii quarti, sit ens in pura potentia, sed per substantiam agentis sibi unitam, in qua unione dependit a corpore vel ab aliquo existente in corpore, et hoc in genere esse efficientis, licet Ioannes gandunus hoc non diceret, sed vult quod solum disponitur (?)'.

<sup>29</sup> Vernia, *Questio*, MS Venice, f. 157bis ra: 'Potest igitur ad formam sue rationis responderi cum queritur utrum intellectus habeat aliam operationem sibi propriam praeter illam quam habet a fantasmatis, dico quod nullam praeter illam, quia primam (?) quam habet dicitur de novo genere ex fantasmatis huius vel illius quantum ad denominationem novam huius vel illius, ut declaratum fuit'.

<sup>30</sup> Vernia, *Questio*, MS Venice, f. 157bis ra: 'Cum enim (?) intellectus agens ex fantasmatis unius individui compleverat omnia intellecta speculativa, dicitur tunc intellectus agens uniri possibili de novo quantum ad intellectionem, quod non est intelligendum simpliciter et absolute ... sed dicitur uniri de novo et quantum ad denominationem respectu huius vel illius individui, quod (?) nunc denominatur tale individuum, ita quod tale individuum dicitur nunc intelligere intellectione prima eterna et nunquam ante. Et hoc est quod voluit Averrois in textu commentarii 36 in tertio de anima cum dixit quod intellectus agens non unitur possibili nisi in postremo'.

<sup>31</sup> This is what Pomponazzi means with the sentence: 'Contra Alexandrum multum valet argumentum illud de universali', quoted above in n. 3.

intellection. Averroes, in contrast, holds that the one material intellect is pure potentiality to receive intelligible forms, and that it is not an active means to acquire intelligible forms. The ontological status of this intellect is a difficulty of Averroes' theory. Vernia fills this gap with his own theory of eternal conjunction. As a consequence, Vernia asserts that the unicity of the intellect is not affected if two individuals are of contrary opinion; the intellect is able to unite both sides. Hence, Vernia dismisses Averroes' (and John of Jandun's) solution that the intelligibles are diversified insofar as they reside in the imagination of the individual human being.

About 12 years later, in his *Contra perversam Averrois opinionem*, Vernia's principal thesis appears, at first sight, to be entirely different. He declares that the intellectual soul is the substantial form of the body, multiplied in the body and created newly in time and that this is not only the true doctrine of the Christian faith and of the theologians, but also in accordance with the principles of natural philosophy and with Aristotle.<sup>32</sup> Large parts of the treatise are devoted to piling up evidence from many different authors of history on topics such as the immortality of the soul; this emphasis on the consensus of the philosophers is probably inherited from Ficino's *Platonica theologia*.<sup>33</sup>

In the last part of the treatise, which lays out the true doctrine, Vernia attempts to show that Aristotle and Plato favour the temporal creation of souls, and proceeds to refute Averroes' arguments in favour of the unicity of the intellect. This refutation is short and technical, apart from the section on the creation of the soul. Vernia refers the reader to his teacher Gaetano da Thiene for further refutations of Averroes. One problem raised by John of Jandun is addressed in greater detail. It concerns the reception of intelligible forms in the individual. Jandun argues: if the intelligible form is received in the intellectual soul and if the soul itself is received in the body, the intelligible form will be received in the body, be it essentially or accidentally, and then intellection will not differ from sensation. Vernia replies that this problem can easily be solved from a Platonic standpoint, for according to Plato the intelligible forms are received *de novo*, but are created together with the souls before they are received in the body – which appears to be a modified version of Vernia's old concept of an eternal intellect, as advanced in the early *Questio*.

But then how does the intelligible remain universal in the human being? Vernia answers with a solution which he attributes to Albertus Magnus and his *De intellectu et intelligibili*:

‘The intellect is individual insofar as it is something belonging to the nature of the soul. But insofar as it sends out acts of intellection, it is in a universal power and thus receives universals, which are not in the intellect like an accident in a

<sup>32</sup> Nicoletto Vernia, *Contra perversam Averrois opinionem de unitate intellectus et de anime felicitate Questiones divine* (Venice 1505) f. 6va, 9ra-b: ‘sed tutius est et melius pro fide et veritate etiam ab Aristotele non differre, ponere unam solam animam in uno animato, ut religionis christianae duo lumina ponunt Albertus et Divus Thomas Aquinates et subtilis doctor’; 9vb-10ra: ‘Dico secundum sacrosanctam Romanam ecclesiam et veritatem quod intellectiva anima est forma substantialis corporis humani, dans ei esse formaliter et intrinsece a sublimi deo creata et in humano corpore infusa, multiplicataque in ipsis secundum multitudinem eorum ... et non tantum credo haec omnia dicta ex fide, sed physice dico omnia possunt probari et etiam cum Aristotele potest sic dici’; 11rb-va: ‘Omnia ergo attributa animae intellectivae a fidelibus doctoribus verissima dico esse simpliciter et omnino et dictis Aristotelis minime repugnare’.

<sup>33</sup> As shown by Kraye 2000, 7, 12. For a consensus passage in Marsilio Ficino see: *Platonica theologia de immortalitate animae*, ed. Marcel 1964-70, vol. III, cap 15.19, 104, this passage ends: ‘Concludamus hominum animas immortales esse. Atque haec est conclusio Platoniorum christianorumque et arabum theologorum praeipateticis maxime consona’. Pomponazzi attacks the consensus argument in chapter 14 of his *Tractatus*; cf. Pietro Pomponazzi, *Tractatus de immortalitate animae*, ed. Mojsisch 1990, cap. 14 (‘ad octavum’), 218-22. Giovanni Pico's *Conclusiones sive Theses 900* also are inspired by a concept of consensus; see Kessler 1994, 279.

subject or a form in matter, and therefore [are] not made individual through the intellect'.<sup>34</sup>

This passage has an Averroist flavour to it. It reminds one of Averroes' *duo subiecta* theory: from an epistemological point of view, the intelligible form resides in the phantasmata and is particular; from an ontological point of view, the intelligible form is in the material intellect and universal. If bishop Barozzi – or one of the three theologians who examined Vernia's treatise and approved of the complete extinction of Averroes, the enemy of Christ<sup>35</sup> – had turned to Albertus' *De intellectu et intelligibili*, they would have found that the passage forms part of a refutation of Averroes – which is appropriate from an Inquisitor's point of view.<sup>36</sup> But if they had also turned to Albertus' earlier *De anima*, they would have detected that this is Albertus' rephrasing of Averroes' two subject-theory – which is exactly that part of Averroes' intellect theory which Albertus finds true<sup>37</sup> and in accordance with his own views: *Et in hac sententia*, says Albertus, *convenit nobiscum Averroes in commento de anima*.<sup>38</sup> Albertus does not accept the overall theory of the unicity of the possible intellect, but he is convinced that the intellected form, insofar as it resides in the possible intellect, is not affected or changed by the possible intellect; it is only changed and individualized insofar as it resides in the phantasmata. Vernia thus introduces Averroes through the back door.

In this case, therefore, it would not be correct to maintain that Vernia has changed his position because of his reading of the Greek commentators or in an attempt to restore the original Aristotle. Rather, Vernia managed to sustain basic principles of his Averroist philosophical position. Averroes' *duo subiecta*-theory was too attractive to be dropped – and it needed not to be dropped, once it was camouflaged as good Albertist doctrine. There is no need to accuse Vernia of lack of principles and lack of conscience. What we encounter instead, is an attempt of philosophical consistency in difficult circumstances.

## II: Alessandro Achillini

Alessandro Achillini, the philosopher and physician from Bologna who died in 1512,<sup>39</sup> has long been regarded a follower of Averroes: by colleagues and pupils,<sup>40</sup> by sixteenth-century authors such as Francesco Vimercato, and by modern scholars such as Ernest Renan<sup>41</sup> and Bruno Nardi.<sup>42</sup> Vimercato in fact put this very clearly in a treatise published in 1543: '... some people hold that there is one intellect in all

<sup>34</sup> Vernia, *Contra perversam*, f. 11rb: '... sic intellectus prout est aliquid naturae animae est individuus, prout autem emittit actiones intelligendi est in virtute universali et sic recipit universalia quae non sunt in eo sicut accidens in subiecto neque sicut forma in materia et ideo per ipsum non individua<n>tur'. I read 'individuantur' with Albertus Magnus, *De intellectu et intelligibili*, in Borgnet 1890, vol. 9, cap. I.7, 488b.

<sup>35</sup> The theologians who approved of the orthodoxy of Vernia's treatise were Antonio Trombetta, OFM, Maurice O'Fihely, and Vincenzo Merlino, OP; see Monfasani 1993, 251, n. 21, and 264-265.

<sup>36</sup> Albertus, *De intellectu* (as in n. 34) cap. I.7, 488.

<sup>37</sup> Albertus Magnus, *De anima*, ed. Stroick 1968, cap. 3.2.7, 186: 'Propter quod etiam formalis intellectus, qui est forma speculata, non habet transmutationem ex intellectu possibili, sed ex phantasmate, in quo est, sicut diximus. Et sic satisfacit Theophrasto quaerenti qualiter esse possit quod intellectus possibilis sit separatus et intransmutabilis et similiter agens, et tamen speculativus sit transmutabilis et temporalis, sicut id quod exit de potentia ad actum. Et in veritate in ista solutione bene satisfacit et verum dicit Averroes'.

<sup>38</sup> Albertus, *De anima*, cap. 3.2.12, 194.

<sup>39</sup> For an introduction to his life and works see Matsen 1974, 21-41. Cf. the older account in Thorndike 1941, 37-49. See also Lohr 1988, 5-6.

<sup>40</sup> See the references to Pomponazzi and Zimara in: Nardi 1958, 231-33.

<sup>41</sup> Renan 1949, 253-54 ('le champion de l'averroisme').

<sup>42</sup> Nardi 1958, 179-223, 226-79, esp. 180 and 274-79, and Nardi 1960: 'L'Achillini nella storia dell'averroismo rappresenta, insomma, la corrente che è stata detta *sigieriana*'.

human beings, for instance Alessandro Achillini, and long before him – according to Achillini himself and a couple of others – the commentator Averroes’.<sup>43</sup>

That Achillini was classified as an Averroist is largely due to his one psychological work, the *Quolibeta de intelligentiis* of 1494, where he addresses the question of whether the human intellect is one and whether it is the form of the body. Achillini’s position in this treatise is much indebted to Averroes, but deviates from the Arab philosopher on crucial points, as will appear shortly. It may have contributed to Achillini’s fame as an Averroist that he himself in a later work, the *De elementis* of 1505, declared the following:

‘You may ask: How does Aristotle’s opinion accord with the faith? For according to natural reason, either the intellect is one, as Averroes understood Aristotle, or the intellect is many [and] its existence has a beginning, as Alexander of Aphrodisias meant. But none of these [opinions] is in accordance with the faith. [My] answer is: this is the reason why I have said that it is necessary to relinquish Aristotle, while choosing among these two false opinions the one which is more probable: the opinion of Averroes’.<sup>44</sup>

Achillini’s contention that truth and certainty is reserved to the realm of faith, is conventional. What is remarkable, though, is his explicit adoption of the unicity thesis as the most probable reading of Aristotle. In the realm of natural reason, there is no certainty, but only probability; but the most probable thesis on the intellect is the unicity thesis.

This is not exactly what Achillini had advanced eleven years earlier as his psychological theory in *De intelligentiis*. The work consists of five *Quolibeta*: on the highest intelligence, on the middle intelligences, on the possible intellect, on the active intellect, on perfection. Each of the *Quolibeta* addresses several *dubia*. Crucial for our purposes is the third *Quolibet* on the possible intellect. Achillini’s text is steeped in quotations from Averroes, but if one concentrates on the conclusions he reaches, his standpoint appears to diverge from that of Averroes. He starts with a refutation of the position of Alexander of Aphrodisias, as he interprets it, that the possible intellect is a material power. When he raises the question of whether every human being has the same possible intellect, his answer is: Aristotle’s opinion is yes, but this opinion is not true: ‘Utrum intellectum possibilem habeat omnis homo. Respondeo per duo dicta: Primum opinio philosophi est quod sic. Secundum illa opinio non est vera’<sup>45</sup> That Achillini means what he says is corroborated by the two final remarks of the two ensuing *dubia*. He notes that he does not follow Averroes on the question of the inherence of accidents in the intellect because he does not share his

<sup>43</sup> Francesco Vimercato, *In tertium librum Aristotelis De anima Commentaria. De anima rationali peripatetica disceptatio* (Venice 1574) 36b: ‘... nonnullis unicum in hominibus omnibus intellectum, ut Alexander Achillinus, et multo antea, iuxta ipsius Achillini et aliorum quorundam sententiam, commentator Averrois ... ponentibus’.

<sup>44</sup> Alessandro Achillini, *De elementis*, in idem, *Opera omnia in unum collecta* (Venice 1551) II.5, f. 123ra: ‘sed dices: quomodo stat opinio Aristotelis cum fide? Quia secundum rationem naturalem aut intellectus est unus, ut intellexit Averrois Aristotelem, aut intellectus est plurificatus incipiens esse, ut intellexit Aphrodisieus Alexander. Istarum autem nulla est conformis fidei. Responsio: haec est circumstantia propter quam dixi oportere relinquere Philosophum et inter duas illas opiniones falsas probabiliorem eligendo: illa est opinio Averrois’. Garin has drawn attention to this passage in Garin 1966, vol. 1, 503-04. For a summary of the contents of *De elementis* see Nardi 1958, 240-48.

<sup>45</sup> Achillini, *Quolibeta*, III, dub. 2, f. 10ra. This passage was misunderstood by Garin who read the question as meaning ‘whether every human being has its own possible intellect’ rather than ‘the same possible intellect’ (cf. Garin 1966, 504). The line of argumentation of the second *dubium*, however, clearly refutes Garin: after having stated the question and the double conclusion, Achillini proceeds to demonstrate the first conclusion, which is that Aristotle affirms the thesis that every human being has *intellectum possibilem*; this Achillini does by pointing out four *viae* which argue for the unicity of the intellect (‘si intellectus possibilis esset multiplicatus ... etc’).



basic and false assumption of the unicity of the intellect.<sup>46</sup> And he states that Averroes' error does not lie in denying that the intellect is a substantial form, but in his underlying thesis<sup>47</sup> – and with this he again refers to the unicity thesis. It is not true, therefore, as is sometimes maintained, that Achillini adopted the position of Siger of Brabant by maintaining both the unicity of the intellect and its being the substantial form of the human being.<sup>48</sup>

In light of this, one wonders why Achillini was regarded an Averroist. One reason certainly was that he forcefully argued for an Averroist interpretation of Aristotle (and he stuck to his opinion, as we know from his later *De elementis*). With this attitude Achillini was in good company: that Averroes correctly interpreted Aristotle but missed the truth was also held by the young Nifo and the young Pomponazzi. But Achillini differs from his younger colleagues by showing sympathies with the Averroist thesis which he declares to be false. He does not – in the *Quolibeta* – claim that the thesis is in conflict with the higher truth of Christian faith, but advances philosophical arguments against the thesis. While the arguments pro Averroes are formulated with much diligence and persuasive power, the counterarguments remain brief and hardly convincing – which gives a distinct Averroist flavour to the chapter.

For Achillini, the strength of Averroes' theory clearly lies in its epistemological advantages (and for this reason, Achillini remains an interesting secondary source on Averroes until today). He groups his arguments in favour of Averroes into four categories: with respect to the person or subject who acquires knowledge (*via cognoscentis*), the object of intellection (*via cogniti*), intellection itself (*via cognitionis*), and finally the corruptibility of the intellect.<sup>49</sup> The main epistemological arguments may be summarized as follows. Firstly: if there were as many possible intellects as there are human beings, it would follow that the intellect, due to its individuation, was a faculty in the body, a faculty in potentiality only, and that it could not be distinguished from sense-perception because it receives particular forms. Secondly: if the intellect were many, it would know neither universal forms nor mathematical forms nor abstract forms. Thirdly: if the intellect were many, it would follow that something known by me and by you would be one concept, but numerically two in respect to the individual. From these two concepts another concept could be abstracted that would again be one concept, but not numerically one, and this would go on to infinity.<sup>50</sup> Moreover, a pupil would not be able not learn from a teacher because they would not share a common knowledge (the latter being an argument by Themistius developed by Averroes).<sup>51</sup>

These arguments are all drawn directly from Averroes' *digressio magna*, his long commentary on chapter III.5, and they are very close in spirit to the original argumentation. Achillini seems to share Thomas Aquinas' conviction (uttered in *De spiritualibus creaturis*): 'that in this argument Averroes seems to have laid the principal force (*praecipuam vim*) [of his theory]' – Thomas refers to the argument that

<sup>46</sup> Achillini, *Quolibeta*, III, dub. 3 fin., f. 12vb: 'sed quia in hoc quaesito Commentator ad suum falsum fundamentum de unitate intellectus consequenter loquitur, posito enim intellectu uno non multiplicato, ponit accidentia non inhaerere illi. Nos autem oppositum illius fundamenti tenemus. Ideo non oportet nos concordare in conclusione sequente ex illo'.

<sup>47</sup> Achillini, *Quolibeta*, III, dub. 4 fin., f. 14vb: 'Hoc autem quolibetum tertium hoc dicto claudimus quod non errat Commentator in hoc quaesito, an intellectus possibilis det esse homini, sed in alio huic circumstanti errat, ut prius patuit etc'.

<sup>48</sup> As argued by Nardi 1958, 182 and 204, followed by Kessler 1988, 495.

<sup>49</sup> Achillini, *Quolibeta*, III, dub. 2, 3, f. 10ra-b.

<sup>50</sup> Achillini, *Quolibeta*, III, dub. 2, 3, f. 10rb: 'secundo, si sic, procederetur in infinitum in conceptibus, quia conceptus essent numero diversi et ab omni per se intelligibili numeraliter multiplicato abstrahibilis est conceptus, ideo ab illis conceptibus essent alii conceptus abstrahibiles'.

<sup>51</sup> Cf. Themistius, *In libros Aristotelis de anima paraphrasis*, ed. Heinze 1899, 103, lin. 36, – 104, lin. 14 (trans. Todd 1996, 129).

individualized intellectual knowledge would not be true intellectual knowledge in actuality.<sup>52</sup>

That Achillini pays special attention to the epistemological reasons in favour of Averroes' theory is obvious also from his arguments against the unicity thesis, since the most extensive refutation concerns the epistemological argument that a pupil could not learn from a teacher if his knowledge was not identical. Achillini replies that the pupil is able to acquire knowledge because the teacher remedies the defects of his syllogistic reasoning: for instance by pointing to the wrong order of the premises or by convincing him of the force of the inference. The acquisition of knowledge through reasoning, however, remains the task of the pupil himself.<sup>53</sup>

If Achillini considers the strengths of Averroes' theory to lie in its solution of the problem of universal knowledge, the question is whether he is also aware of how Averroes would address the weaknesses of his theory. In fact, Achillini is aware of these strategies, as is obvious from an argument he advances in defence of Averroes. It had been argued against Averroes that on the assumption of the unicity of the intellect, the same intellect acquires knowledge of the same object in two different operations, namely, the operations of two different individuals. Achillini here hits at the core problem of how the intellection of a universal form remains the intellection performed by an individual. He replies with a version of Averroes' *duo subiecta*-theory. Achillini says: 'According to Averroes, Socrates and Plato [that is, two individuals] can operate by way of a numerically identical operation, just as they do also through the same intellect'.<sup>54</sup> This is possible because the same form which is one with respect to the receiver is many in its received format, as *intentio accepta*. In Averroes' original theory, the intelligible form is many as *intentio accepta* because it is comprehended only via the phantasmata in imagination. Achillini gives a slightly different bent to this theory: the *intentio accepta* can be many because different human beings compose the forms in different ways, since they acquire knowledge in different ways.<sup>55</sup> It is thus the individual arrangement of the intelligible forms rather than than their connection or union with the particular imaginative forms which safeguards the individuality of intellection according to Achillini.

It is clear then that Achillini's standpoint in the *Quolibeta* differs from his later statement in *De elementis*: In the *Quolibeta*, Achillini argues philosophically against Averroes; he does not retreat to the safe island of Christian faith. Hence, in the *Quolibeta*, the Averroist position is the correct interpretation of Aristotle, but Aristotle's theory itself ought to be refuted philosophically. The quotation from *De elementis* offers us a hint of what Achillini really held, already in the *Quolibeta*, without saying it directly: Averroes' thesis is false, but most probable; false from the viewpoint of the believer, but most probable philosophically.<sup>56</sup> I suspect that Achillini as a believer was convinced of the falsity of Averroes' thesis but tried hard, and unsuccessfully, to find good philosophical arguments against Averroes. The attraction

<sup>52</sup> Thomas Aquinas, *De spiritualibus creaturis*, in idem, *Quaestiones disputatae*, vol. 2 (Turin/Rome 1953) art. 9, ad 6, 403: 'Ad sextum dicendum quod in hac ratione praecipuam vim videtur Averroes constituere: quia videlicet sequeretur, ut ipse dicit, si intellectus possibilis non esset unus in omnibus hominibus, quod res intellecta individuaretur et numeraretur per individuationem et numerationem singularium hominum, et sic esset intellecta in potentia et non in actu'.

<sup>53</sup> Achillini, *Quolibeta*, III, dub. 2, ad 3, f. 11ra.

<sup>54</sup> Achillini, *Quolibeta*, III, dub. 2, f. 10vb: 'Ad probationem: eadem operatione numero apud Averroem operari possunt Socrates et Plato quemadmodum et eodem intellectu'.

<sup>55</sup> Achillini, *Quolibeta*, III, dub. 2, f. 10vb: 'Unde 3 de anima, commen. 5: haec intellecta sunt unica secundum recipiens et multa secundum intentionem acceptam, et sic infra concludit intellectum speculativum esse unum in omnibus hominibus, potest tamen intellectus possibilis speciem obiecti diversimode componere secundum quod diversi homines diversimode intelligunt'.

<sup>56</sup> Hence, it does not hit the mark to say that 'Achillini did not accept the unity of the intellect' (Kristeller 1965, 114) or that 'die Konzeption einer "Einheit des (possiblen) Intellekts" wird zurückgewiesen' (Leinkauf 2001, col 797-98).

exerted by Averroes upon Renaissance thinkers can be distinctly felt in the texts of Achillini.

### III: Luca Prassicio

Vernia, Nifo and Pomponazzi<sup>57</sup> have in common that they do not stick to their Averroist position on the intellect in their later years. In contrast, Luca Prassicio from Naples was a hardcore Averroist. Prassicio, who died 1533, has received little attention in scholarship,<sup>58</sup> which is mainly due to the fact that his *Questio de immortalitate anime intellective* printed in Naples in 1521 is extant only in very few copies.<sup>59</sup> Prassicio's treatise is written as a statement in the public debate over Pomponazzi's *Tractatus de immortalitate animae* of 1516. Pomponazzi refutes Averroes' reading of Aristotle in the course of this treatise, which culminates in the thesis that according to Aristotle and to natural reason, the intellective soul is essentially dependent upon the phantasmata and hence dependent upon bodily functions, with the consequence that the soul is essentially mortal.<sup>60</sup> In the last chapter (cap. 15) he qualifies his position by reserving true certainty in this matter to the Christian faith. Pomponazzi was attacked in a flood of publications,<sup>61</sup> one of them by Agostino Nifo who attempted to show that Aristotle in fact proved the immortality of the soul.<sup>62</sup> Luca Prassicio is content neither with Pomponazzi's standpoint nor with Nifo's reply. His aim is to show that Pomponazzi erred when rejecting Averroes' reading of Aristotle and that Nifo's ill-informed defence of Averroes did a poor service to the Peripatetic cause. The overall conclusion of Prassicio's 29-page treatise is that both Aristotle and Averroes had taught the immortality of the active as well as of the possible intellect.<sup>63</sup>

Prassicio's treatise is perhaps the most outspoken attempt to defend Averroes in Renaissance philosophy, as is signaled by its very title: 'Question on the immortality of the intellective soul according to the opinion of Aristotle, who was never more truly interpreted than by Averroes', and, even more forcefully, by a sentence from the preface: 'As far as I can see, I can find nothing more certain and true on the immortality of the soul than what can be taken from Averroes'. Nevertheless, even Prassicio, the convicted partisan of Averroes, adds that Aristotle's and Averroes' opinion on immortality is wrong and erroneous; the truth remains with *catholica nostra religio*.<sup>64</sup> Prassicio does not say much about the details of the true doctrine. He

<sup>57</sup> On Pomponazzi, see the recent articles Krayer 1999 and 2000; on Nifo, see Mahoney 2000, and Hasse *forthcoming*.

<sup>58</sup> On Prassicio see Di Napoli 1963, 318-20; Lohr 1988, 368.

<sup>59</sup> I have used the copy in the British library, shelfmark C.103.g.43.

<sup>60</sup> Pomponazzi, *Tractatus* (as in n. 33) cap. 9, 78-116.

<sup>61</sup> See the surveys of this debate in Di Napoli 1963, 277-338, Pine 1986, 124-38.

<sup>62</sup> Agostino Nifo, *De immortalitate anime libellus* (Venice 1518) cap. 84-85, f. 82vb-24rb, esp. f. 23rb: 'Verum Aristoteles ipsam (scil. animam) remanere (scil. post obitum) opinatum esse, dubitandum non est, quandoquidem ex ipso intelligere et velle et ex intellectis ipsis apertissime ipsam post mortem remanere deduxit'.

<sup>63</sup> Luca Prassicio, *Questio de immortalitate anime intellective secundum mentem Aristotelis a nemine verius quam ab Averroi interpretati* (Naples 1521) sig. C2vb: 'Quapropter teneo assertive hanc conclusionem esse ad mentem tam Aristotelis quam Averrois pro ultimo eorum nuncupativo testamento, quod anima intellectiva est simpliciter immortalis ex parte utriusque intellectus'. Cf. also the conclusion of the treatise on sig. D4rb.

<sup>64</sup> Prassicio, *Questio*, sig. A1v: 'Ego autem quantum intueri possum nil certi nilque veri de immortalitate animae reperio nisi ea quae ex Averroi excerpti possunt. Et dicant quid velint eius aemuli mordaces et malevoli, sunt enim omnes ut oblatrantes a tergo catelli. Et quamvis tam Aristotelis quam Averrois positio de immortalitate animae sit falsa et erronea, tamen quid ipsi senserint iusta vires conatus sum ostendere. Ea vero quae tenet et sentit catholica nostra religio de animae immortalitate deque eius multiplicatione pro hominum numero testor et fateor esse ipsam infallibilem veritatem'.

once mentions that *catholice* speaking the human being as a *compositum* is mortal, but that its essential or formal part is eternal. But he quickly bypasses this standpoint, given that it is not Peripatetic.<sup>65</sup>

Pomponazzi had maintained that only the active intellect is separable and eternal. Prassicio's principal aim is to demonstrate that this is true also for the material intellect – which is tantamount to a defense of the Averroist doctrine of the unicity of the intellect. This is curious because the popular defamation of Averroes as the enemy of Christ was based on the assumption that Averroes denies personal immortality. But personal immortality is not a topic for Prassicio. He makes Averroes a champion of immortality theory for holding that the intellective soul is *simpliciter* immortal *ex parte utriusque intellectus*.

Because immortality was his major concern, it is natural that for Prassicio the attractiveness of Averroes' intellect theory consisted in those features that proved the complete separability of the material intellect. Pomponazzi's first argument against Averroes had been that the human intellect cannot operate independently of the body.<sup>66</sup> Prassicio castigates Nifo's misguided response to this argument<sup>67</sup> and proceeds to refute Pomponazzi by laying out the true doctrine of Averroes:

'since [according to Averroes] the soul has one nature in number in a metaphysical constitution [i.e. separated in reason and essence], as we have often said, the soul has its own intellection which is separate from the phantasma, continuous and eternal, and which is the substance and not the power of the [person] who acquires knowledge. When it happens that [the intellection] is united with a human being – but not in a univocal way and through formal inherence, as Nifo falsely hallucinates, rather through effective assistance to the phantasmata, by making the phantasm actually intelligible – then a universal form comes about in the material intellect'.<sup>68</sup>

Note that Prassicio in passing attacks Nifo's reading of Averroes, which, he says, is inherited from John of Jandun. This reading is characterized by the combination of the unicity thesis with the doctrine of the soul as substantial form of the body. Averroes would have been gripped by madness or melancholic spirit, replies Prassicio with some justification, had he designed such an obvious nonsense (*publicam fatuitatem*).<sup>69</sup> What Nifo says is nothing but 'breaking heretically with the

<sup>65</sup> Prassicio, *Questio*, sig. B3vb.

<sup>66</sup> Pomponazzi, *Tractatus* (as in n. 33) cap. IV, 16-24 (18): 'Nullo igitur modo intellectus humanus secundum Aristotelem habet operationem prorsus a corpore independentem'. Cf. Prassicio, *Questio*, sig. B4ra.

<sup>67</sup> Prassicio, *Questio*, sig. B4rb: 'Domine Augustine, haec responsio pro Averroae pace tua peccat multiphariam'. He refers to Nifo, *De immortalitate* (as in n. 62), cap. 15, f. 4ra-b, especially to his claim that the intellective soul can be regarded in three different ways (f. 4ra): 'Ulterius debes scire animae intellectuales ... trifariam considerari posse. Uno modo ut intellectus atque intelligentiae, alio modo ut perfectiones physicorum corporum, hoc est ut motores illorum, et tertio ut intellectuales animae quasi res mediae'.

<sup>68</sup> Prassicio, *Questio*, sig. B4va: 'Anima cum unam numero habeat naturam metaphisice constitutam ut saepe diximus, semper habeat propriam eius intellectionem separatam a phantasmate continuam aeternam quae est substantia et non potentia intelligentis. Cum vero ipsam contingat homini uniri, non univoce et per formalem inhaerentiam ut falso Augustinus sompniat, sed magis per assistentiam effectivam ad phantasmata illa actu intellecta afficiendo, statim fit species universalis in intellectu materiali'.

<sup>69</sup> Prassicio, *Questio*, sig. B2vb-3ra: 'Quam positionem revera Ioannes Candavensis mirum in modum ebitit ac pergustavit. Modo quae dementia quisve melancolicus humor seu spiritus Averroim arripisset hanc publicam fatuitatem excogitare: intellectum seu animam intellectivam ut intelligentiarum infimam per essentiam secundum remque separatam et incorruptibilem uniri formaliter ut tenet Augustinus comiserique cum re corruptibili utpote cum sensitivo et vegetativo ...!'

doctrine of Averroes' (*apostetare in doctrina Averrois*).<sup>70</sup> Prassicio's anger shows us that Averroism had become a real current: the matter of dispute was not the correct interpretation of Aristotle, but the true doctrine of the partisans' leader, Averroes.

Prassicio replaces, with Averroes, the concept of *anima intellectiva forma corporis* by *anima intellectiva per assistentiam ad phantasmata unita*.<sup>71</sup> It is clear that he can thus ensure the separability of the material intellect. This theory has additional merits, finds Prassicio: it explains how the actually intelligible forms that are derived from material things can be eternal.<sup>72</sup> And it explains how an entity which is not separated from matter may be able to understand separate intelligible forms.<sup>73</sup> Prassicio thus spells out what was implicit in the writings of some of the previous Averroists, such as Achillini: Averroes' strength also lies in a solution to the epistemological problem of the intellection of universal forms by an individual.

There are, however, differences between Averroes' and Prassicio's account of the moment of intellection. When Averroes addresses the question of how the intellected form can be both eternal and corruptible, he draws a parallel to sense-perception and argues that intellection is accomplished through the forms in imagination which are united with the material intellect. Averroes asks: what does actualization mean where intelligible objects are concerned? Prassicio, in contrast, takes his cue from the phantasmata. The phantasmata can be considered in two ways, with respect to this or that individual person, or with respect to the species (or the specific form). In the latter mode, they are ungenerated and incorruptible. This is possible because:

‘the phantasmata themselves, which are not yet intelligibles that inhere in the [phantasmata], perpetuate themselves successively according to the specific form in that [phantasma] through continuous and eternal sensible, pure and unmixed reproduction. And likewise the speculative intellects, which inhere in those [phantasmata] subjectively, render themselves eternal according to the specific form in those [intellects] through continuous and eternal intellectual reproduction, which is not pure, but phantasma-like’.<sup>74</sup>

Prassicio's model for this theory is clearly the eternity of the species human being, which is safeguarded through unceasing reproduction. Similarly, the phantasmata are eternal in the sense that their specific form perpetuates itself through eternal reproduction of phantasmata.

This is not what Averroes means. First, even though for Averroes it follows from the unicity of the material intellect that the species human being is eternal,<sup>75</sup> there is

<sup>70</sup> Prassicio, *Questio*, sig. B2vb: ‘... mirandum est de Augustino acceptante animam intellectivam esse intelligentiarum infimam et ponente aliam compositionem in illa, quod non est aliud nisi apostetare in doctrina Averrois’.

<sup>71</sup> Prassicio, *Questio*, sig. D4ra-b: ‘... secundum Averroem asserentem ubique animam intellectivam non esse formam corporis univoce, videlicet per formalem inhaerentiam illi unitam, sed tantum aequivoce per assistentiam effectivam seu affectivam ad phantasmata hominis’.

<sup>72</sup> Prassicio, *Questio*, sig. B3rb: ‘sed cur species et forma actu intellectae rerum materialium sensibilibus generabilium et corruptibilium sunt aeternae, nemo ex modernis Peripatetice explicat’. He proceeds to answer the question with Averroes' *duo subiecta*-theory.

<sup>73</sup> Prassicio, *Questio*, sig. D2va: ‘... ubi ait (*scil. Aristoteles*): utrum autem contingit aliquid separatorum intelligere ipsum existentem non separatum a magnitudine ... Quae verba solus Averroes summus Aristotelis interpres recte interpretatus est’.

<sup>74</sup> Prassicio, *Questio*, sig. B3va: ‘... ita phantasmata ipsa nondum intellecta in illis inexistencia secundum continuum et aeternam sensitivam puram et immistam generationem se ipsa successive secundum speciem in illa perpetuant. Et similiter intellectus speculativi in illis subiective inexistentes secundum continuum et aeternam intellectivam generationem non puram sed phantasticam se ipsos secundum speciem in illis aeternos reddunt’.

<sup>75</sup> Averroes, *Commentarium magnum*, cap. III.5, 406-407: ‘Quoniam, quia opinati sumus ex hoc sermone quod intellectus materialis est unicus omnibus hominibus et etiam ex hoc sumus opinati quod species humana est aeterna, ... etc’.; see Taylor 1998, 102-106.

no question of the phantasmata being transitory. Second, the intelligibles are eternal ontologically, because they exist immaterially and eternally in the material intellect; they are not eternal because of reproduction. Averroes is aware of the problem that if the material intellect and the intelligibles are eternal, one could argue that also the phantasmata, which are needed for intellection, also have to be eternal (this is a criticism he directs against Themistius).<sup>76</sup> Hence Averroes' insistence upon the individual character of the intelligibles insofar as they are comprehended via imagination. Prassicio, in contrast, does not seem to be aware of this problem, although he clearly knows Averroes' *duo subiecta*-theory very well and quotes it often.<sup>77</sup> But he sees its strength not in saving the individuality of the intelligibles actually present in the phantasmata – this individuality he takes for granted – but in showing the separability of the speculative intellect *secundum rem*.<sup>78</sup> Prassicio is so much concerned with the separability thesis that he does not guard his interpretation of Averroes against the charge of risking the individuality of intellection.

#### IV: Conclusion

It can be concluded that there is clear evidence that the philosophical attraction of the unicity thesis was a major historical factor in the rise of Averroism in the Renaissance. We have seen that two medieval adversaries of Averroes' thesis, Albertus Magnus and Thomas Aquinas, acknowledged the strength of some of Averroes' arguments. Albertus Magnus agreed with Averroes that the universal intelligible is not individualized in the intellect, but only *ex phantasmate*. Thomas Aquinas sees the principal force of Averroes' position in the argument that individualized intellectual knowledge would not be true intellectual knowledge in actuality. The epistemological advantages of the theory were estimated in the Renaissance, as the writings of Achillini and Prassicio testify: Averroes offered a solution to the problem of the knowledge of universal intelligibles. As a consequence, when the fortuna of the unicity thesis declined in the later sixteenth century, it was not because it had been attacked by humanists or Platonists, but because new explanations of universal intellection had been offered within the Aristotelian tradition.<sup>79</sup> Nevertheless, the above survey has also shown that the epistemological features of Averroes' theory of the material intellect were only one reason for its appeal. Nicoletto Vernia does not make much use of the many arguments with respect to intellection offered by Averroes; rather, he was taken by the ontological concept of a unique and separate intellect, which, in tension with Averroes, is interpreted by Vernia as having eternal intellectual knowledge. Luca Prassicio conceives of Averroes' position as a particularly strong defense of the immortality of the soul, for the reason that it advocates the complete separability of the human intellect.

The comprehensiveness and systematic character of Averroes' *digressio magna* clearly helped to provoke the extraordinary reception of the unicity thesis in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. The digression laid out a wealth of arguments and positions of the commentators' tradition and proposed solutions to several systematic problems concerning the human (or material) intellect. The Renaissance Peripatetics were aware of the material richness of this text and chose to take up one or the other argumentative line offered by it in order to develop their philosophical position within the contemporary discussion of intellect theories. The reception of the unicity thesis

<sup>76</sup> Averroes, *Commentarium magnum*, cap. III.5, 391: 'si igitur intentiones quas intellectus comprehendit ex formis imaginatis essent aeternae, tunc intentiones virtutum imaginatarum essent aeternae. Et si istae essent aeternae, tunc sensationes essent aeternae'.

<sup>77</sup> See n. 72 above.

<sup>78</sup> Prassicio, *Questio*, sig. D4ra: 'sed quonam modo intellectus speculativus habet esse quod sit unum entium ab intellectu materiali per hoc quod subiective est in illo, nemo explicat'.

<sup>79</sup> This thesis is developed in Hasse *forthcoming*.

among these authors thus contributes to the impressive, and perhaps unparalleled liveliness of the Aristotelian tradition in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries.<sup>80</sup>

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<sup>80</sup> Lohr 1988, XIII: 'It is an astonishing fact that the number of Latin commentaries on Aristotle composed within this brief period (*i.e.* 1500-1650) exceeds that of the entire millenium from Boethius to Pomponazzi'.

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