One of the largest ongoing debates in contemporary scholarship on Avicenna (Ibn Sīnā, the 10th–11th-century Persian philosopher) concerns his epistemology of the acquisition of intelligible forms (or concepts) between the more traditional “emanationists” and the more recent “abstractionists”. It is encouraging to see a topic in Avicenna (and Islamic philosophy more broadly) receive the kind of detailed scholarly attention regularly afforded to many other figures in the history of philosophy. And for good reason. This is a paramount issue in Avicenna’s philosophy (which went on to influence both the Islamic and Western traditions in unrivaled fashion), and the two accounts need to be reconciled in a much more satisfactory way.

Emanationists — such as Rahman, Davidson, and Black, following major historical sources such as Averroes (Ibn Rushd) and Aquinas — argue that Avicenna envisions the universal intelligibles as emanated directly into human minds from the separate and eternal Active Intellect (hereafter AI). Abstractionists — such as Hasse and Gutas — argue that the intelligibles are rather the result of the human intellectual activity of abstraction from sensory images. The debate boils down to this: From where do the intelligibles initially come — from above, i.e., the AI (in a more “Neo-Platonic” fashion), or from below, i.e., from sense experience and images (in a more “Aristotelian” fashion)? Both sides can point to numerous seemingly probative texts in Avicenna’s corpus.

1. One of the most important texts in favor of emanationism is the last chapter of the psychological part of al-Najāt (The Salvation), 192–193 (Rahman transl., Avicenna’s Psychology, 68–69), which states that the Active Intellect “gives the soul and imprints on it the intelligible forms from its substance” (192.21–22). One of the most important texts in favor of abstractionism is Avicenna’s discussion of the process in al-Shīfā (The Cure), al-Nafs (Psychology), II.2, 58–61, and Najāt, 168–171 (Rahman 38–40). Highly contested on both sides is Shīfā’, Psychology V.5. Unless otherwise stated, all translations are my own, though I have consulted some existing translations where available. I thank audiences at the University of Notre Dame and Syracuse University for feedback on earlier versions of this project. In particular, I wish to thank Peter Adamson, Deborah Black, Therese Cory, Kendall Fisher, Kara Richardson, Richard Taylor, anonymous referees, and especially Jon McGinnis for many valuable comments and suggestions. I am also very grateful for the Andrew Mellon...
Both camps have clarified their positions so as to approach greater agreement, though bright dividing lines remain. Abstractionists argue that they can defuse the issue, but their attempts fail to see that the problem cannot be eliminated entirely by a distinction between the first acquisition of intelligibles and the later recollection of previously grasped intelligibles. Other scholars have tried to construct a *via media*. In section I, I will discuss some of these interpretations, indicating why none are yet adequate due to lacking or contradictory textual evidence or the fact that even the most conciliatory abstractionists cannot explain some of Avicenna’s most important emanationist texts regarding the AI’s active role in the first acquisition of intelligibles.

I propose that the two positions can be much more convincingly reconciled because Avicenna states in many texts across his corpus that the AI emanates is a *power* (often designated by the metaphor of light), and not the various intelligible forms. I argue that we should identify that emanated power with the *power of abstraction itself*. Thus, we can call my interpretation “emanated abstraction”. Part of what has bogged down the debate is the association of abstraction with an exclusively human activity, having nothing to do with the AI’s emanation. On my view, however, the activities of both the AI and the human being are necessary and co-efficient causes of first learning the intelligibles. The AI confers the power of abstraction (compared to light) onto human intellects, from which it is then enacted upon the potentially intelligible images, making them actually intelligible. If I am right, this upholds the chief abstractionist thesis, viz., that the intelligibles are abstracted at first from sense images and are not emanated directly from the AI into human intellects. Yet, unlike abstractionists and in partial agreement with emanationists, my interpretation reveals why Avicenna gives the AI and its emanation an active and simultaneous role in the first acquisition of intelligibles.

I present the chief evidence for this emanated abstraction view in section II, drawing from a wide range of texts, including major passages from the *Psychology of the Shifā*’ (*The Cure*) V.5 and the *Najāt* (*Salvation*). Although none of the texts categorically says the AI emanates “the power of abstraction”, I argue, on the basis of decisive interpretative and philosophical reasons, that the explicitly mentioned power and metaphorical light can only be the power of abstraction. In section III, I consider further objections to my view, particularly from emanationists. Section IV attempts to explain in more detail what abstraction is and how Avicenna’s analogies for it lend even greater support to the emanated abstraction interpretation. In sum, I offer a new interpretation which does greater justice to Avicenna’s epistemology and his wider philosophical system than the erstwhile rival theories. This study also reveals Avicenna’s unique place in the history of epistemology, displaying more accurately where he maintains continuity with others in the tradition and where he strikes his own path.

I. Status of the Scholarly Debate

Recent scholarly contributions have partially bridged the gap between emanationism and abstractionism (whether this has been realized or not). On the one hand, Black now acknowledges that sensory experience is a *necessary*, preparatory cause of the acquisition of the intelligibles, and, indeed, that the mind’s consideration of certain images is required and determines which intelligible emanates from the AI. On the other hand, one of Gutas’s most extensive accounts never contradicts Black’s most recent portrayal of the emanationist interpretation: While arguing that processes such as abstraction and thinking are “real”, Gutas acknowledges that Avicenna calls them “preparatory” and describes them as necessary (and never sufficient) for knowledge

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1. Black, “How Do We Acquire Concepts?”. This is a very formidable defense of emanationism. Her emanationism seems more stark in earlier works, e.g., “Avicenna on the Ontological and Epistemic Status of Fictional Beings”, esp. 445 (“… Avicenna explicitly denies any causal influence of the imagination upon the intellect, that is, he denies the reality of abstraction ….”), and “Mental Existence in Thomas Aquinas and Avicenna”, esp. 56–57.

2. "Avicenna on the Ontological and Epistemic Status of Fictional Beings", esp. 445 ("... Avicenna explicitly denies any causal influence of the imagination upon the intellect, that is, he denies the reality of abstraction ....").
acquisition. Gutas mainly makes his case “regardless of emanation” without attempting to reduce it away.

Also, we must note that emanationists and abstractionists do not differ at all with respect to Avicenna’s well-documented emanationism regarding recalled intelligibles, i.e., intellectual memory. All parties agree that Avicenna thinks the intelligibles (once obtained) cannot remain stored in the human intellect; rather, the intelligibles are eternally preserved in the separately existing and fully actual AI, from which they are emanated to the human intellect in moments of recollection. This point is central for abstractionist interpreters like Gutas and Hasse who insist that although emanation is real, it claims a merely “ontological” role, explaining where intelligibles are stored while waiting to be recalled by humans. In contradistinction, they argue the only “epistemological” role is played by human abstraction.

This division between ontological-emanation-memory and epistemological-abstraction-learning constitutes the preferred abstractionist solution to the debate, but I am skeptical. First of all, the distinction is not well-formed, since intellectual memory is still epistemological (more on that below). Second and most importantly, this bifurcation ignores many passages, including the famous al-Shifa’s Psychology V.5, where Avicenna clearly depicts the AI and its emanation as involved simultaneously even in the first acquisition of the intelligibles and the first movement of our potential intellects into actuality. In fact, in the

4. Gutas, “Intuition”, 31. See his endorsement of the “reality of the active intellect” in this process at 29. Though see also Taylor’s comments on Gutas’s remarks there, observing that Gutas thinks of the AI as a necessary condition, but not any kind of efficient cause (Taylor, “Avicenna and the Issue of the Intellectual Abstraction of Intelligibles”, 65).
5. See Avicenna, Psychology V.6 for the famous chapter detailing this position. See also Isharāt wa-l-Tanbihāt (Pointers and Reminders), II.3.13.
7. Psychology V.5, 234–236. Abstractionists claim it supports their reading, but

Book of Definitions, Avicenna defines the AI as the intellect that “brings the material intellect in potentiality [i.e., the original, most potential stage of the human intellect] into actuality by its illumination (bi-ishrāqi-hi) upon it.” In that text and elsewhere, he does not (as abstractionists would have it) at all limit the AI to acting only on the human intellect which has already grasped an intelligible and simply needs to recall it currently.

But even if one accepts the abstractionist picture, we must remember its significant epistemological overlap with the emanationist account. According to both views, the majority of all knowledge comes via emanation from the AI, since the grasp of any “remembered” intelligible and all middle terms in a syllogism are provided through emanation from the AI, either spontaneously through intuition (ḥads) or after a search through thinking (fikr). Thus, Hasse’s most recent article, “Avicenna’s Epistemological Optimism”, may be too optimistic when he states that “[i]n principle, human beings are fully capable of acquiring perfect knowledge by themselves.” Even if Hasse is right about abstractionism, the only thing we do by ourselves is initially grasp a simple universal intelligible (like “human”, or “red”), which is only the first (albeit essential) step in Avicenna’s complex epistemology. Equally important are the steps of recollection, intuition, and thinking, which are

the AI’s emanation is obviously involved (as Hasse admits, e.g., in his important and convincing defense of abstractionism, “Avicenna on Abstraction”, 53 and 56; cf. Avicenna’s De Anima in the Latin West, 187). This text is prior to Avicenna’s discussion of the AI’s emanation in intellectual memory in V.6. The V.5 passage and several others will be discussed below.

8. Kitāb al-Hudūd (Book of Definitions), 13.11–12, emphasis mine. Cf. Pointers II.3.10, 392.2–3, where the AI moves the human intellect into higher states of actuality at each stage, from the material intellect onward. The title ‘material intellect’ only means that it is absolutely potential without having gained any concepts; Avicenna argues that even at this stage, the human intellect is actually immaterial, and the rational soul is a separable substance. For the other stages of the intellect’s development, see below, fn. 36.
9. Pointers III.7.9, 270.3–5: “These [other philosophers] also sometimes say that if the rational soul understands (‘aqalat) a thing, then it understands that thing through its contact with the Active Intellect. And this is true”.
the only ways of acquiring at least all propositional scientific knowledge. All parties agree that recollection and hitting upon the middle term (whether by intuition or thinking) are described consistently by Avicenna as an emanation from the AI.

Still, the two camps do not agree. In other places, Gutas hints that “emanation from the AI” may be “nothing but a metaphor” for purely human cognitive processes, put in “emanative language which he inherited from the Neo-Platonic tradition.” Although Hasse suggests neither abstraction nor emanation are metaphors, in consigning the AI’s role to the “ontological” one of intellectual memory, he implies that abstraction is sufficient for the first acquisition of the intelligibles. On the other side, while Black no longer seems to uphold Rahman’s classic emanationist description of abstraction as a façon de parler, she still argues variously that abstraction (at least according to typical explanations) is something absent or explicitly rejected in Avicenna, and she forcefully denies that abstraction is sufficient for first learning the intelligibles. Indeed, emanationists must hold that all of Avicenna’s talk of abstraction should be understood as real, albeit merely preparatory, actions performed at the level of imagination which then dispose us to receive the intelligible form emanated directly from the AI.


14. Hasse, ‘Optimism’, 117. In many other places, Hasse emphasizes the AI’s role in ways I endorse — e.g., ‘Abstraction’, 52–53 (“... [Psychology] V.5 is not simply about the active intellect but about its involvement in abstraction ...”); cf. ‘Optimism’, 114. Yet he doesn’t seem to integrate such statements with his abstractionist thesis, especially in truncating the AI’s role to intellectual memory.


16. Two older studies by Goichon and Gilson also might seem to gesture towards compromise. Goichon, La Distinction de l’essence et de l’existence, 309–311, says that neither abstraction nor emanation is wholly responsible for the acquisition of the intelligible. But she does not develop her interpretation and elsewhere upholds emanationism (Introduction à Avicenne, 47). Gilson, ‘Les sources gréco-arabes de l’au-justinsime avicennisant’, actually claims the identity of abstraction and emanation (65). However, he seems to mean the AI alone abstracts the intelligibles, which are then emanated, ‘du dehors’, from the AI to the human intellect (65, 73, 107). So Gilson’s essay remains a seminal locus of emanationism. For even older conciliatory attempts, see Hasse, Avicennas De Anima, 201, where some medieval Latin thinkers, such as John Blond, witness to a view in which the AI ‘mediates’ abstraction in some undefined way.


18. Madkhal 1.2, 15.3–5. I agree here with criticisms from Hasse, ‘Optimism’, McGinnis and Alpina have attempted to defend interpretations that are closer to true viae mediae. McGinnis holds perhaps the most conciliatory view to date. His solution is that human abstraction produces the intelligible in its essence, but that the AI must emanate upon the generated essence the “intellectualizing forms”, which McGinnis interprets as the intelligible accidents mentioned by Avicenna in his Madkhal (Introduction) to the Logic of the Shifāʾ: accidents such as universality and particularity in predication, etc. Abstraction strips the essence in itself from the particularizing accidents of the material world while the AI emanates the necessary intellectualizing accidents which allow for the essence to exist conceptualized in a mind. The great advantage of this interpretation is that it incorporates the textual evidence in favor of both abstraction and emanation in the first acquisition of intelligibles. Yet this theory suffers from a lack of textual evidence. Avicenna in his psychological work never identifies the emanated intelligible forms (al-ṣuwar al-maʾqālāt/al-ʾaqīyya) with the conceptualizing accidents of the Logic, and he never says the AI emanates the latter (only the former). Indeed, Avicenna argues that the logical accidents of particularity and universality follow immediately and necessarily upon the proper modes of existence for an essence and are not the kind of thing that could be emanated separately from essences themselves.
Nevertheless, my interpretation may align most closely with McGinnis’s since he appeals to abstraction and emanation equally and also draws major support from Avicenna’s comparison of the AI’semanation to the light of the sun.19

Alpina’s thorough study is one of the most clarifying yet in this debate.20 While still subscribing to abstractionism, Alpina is exactly right that the proposed separation of “epistemological” abstraction and “ontological” emanation misfires. On the contrary, Alpina highlights how, as noted above, Avicenna involves the AI in the first acquisition of the intelligibles, envisaged as pouring its light upon the images in order for abstraction to occur in Psychology V.5.21 Alpina thus correctly insists that both the human agent and the AI have “active roles” in first learning the intelligibles, and his approach constitutes a major advance in this regard.22

Nevertheless, Alpina’s account is not perspicacious about what that active role of the AI is. Alpina’s explanation is cashed out in terms of

activities only far (i.e., eternally!) prior or just after the acquisition of the intelligible, activities which seem to have no real causal effect in the moment of grasping a simple intelligible. On the prior side, he argues that the AI provides “the condition of the possibility for the imaginatory particulars’ actual intelligibility”,23 and he means to equate the AI in Avicenna’s epistemology with the so-called Giver of Forms (wāhib al-ṣawār) in his metaphysics. Thus, he suggests that the AI’s role as the condition of the possibility of intellelction is just its metaphysical role of eternally emanating essences to the sublunar world. We might say the AI puts the possibility of intelligibility into the world in the first place by imbuing it with essences which are potentially intelligible. I agree; however, a “condition of the possibility” does not seem causally active in the moment of acquisition. Human images are no less a necessary condition of the possibility of understanding, but images coupled with the AI’s metaphysical giving of forms are certainly not jointly sufficient for intellection. Surely, the AI must do something else in moving our potential intellects into actuality (as Avicenna frequently insists),24 rather than merely providing a necessary background condition.

On the later side, Alpina also proposes that the AI’s “shining light guarantees that the human intellect has correctly abstracted from matter the very forms that the Dator forarmum has previously infused in it .... [It] provides the validation of the human intellect’s correct acquisition of intellectual forms”.25 Again, I think this might be correct and significant.26 However, it also misses the mark of identifying the AI’s relevant active role because it is limited to a stamp of approval only after the acquisition of the intelligible, a process Avicenna and Alpina himself say the AI somehow initiates through its light.27 Avicenna

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23. Ibid. 169.
27. Avicenna, Psychology V.5, 234.16–17: “So here there is a cause which brings
names the AI as the necessary cause which brings out our potential intellects into actuality in the first step of knowledge. In sum, Alpina has admirably emphasized (unlike other abstractionists) that the AI plays a role in first learning; however, he does not adequately identify what that role is.

I understand why Alpina’s middle path still subscribes to abstractionism. Avicenna’s many texts delineating abstraction as actually productive of the universal intelligible and the act of understanding (and not merely preparing for such) constitute strong evidence against emanationism. To take just one important example, at the beginning of Psychology V.6, immediately after the pivotal V.5 on the acquisition of the intelligibles (where both abstraction and the AI’s emanation are mentioned), Avicenna summarizes his position and what has preceded:

We say that the soul understands (taqili) by taking into itself the form of intelligibles abstracted (mu‘jarra) from matter. The form is abstracted either by the intellect’s abstraction (taqrid) of it, or because the form is [already] abstracted in itself from matter, and in the latter case the soul is saved the effort of abstracting (taqrid) it.

In this passage, the human soul and intellect are the sole agents of abstraction and intellect. Also, abstraction requires effort (it is not merely a state of immaterial receptivity). As Avicenna importantly puts it elsewhere:

[T]he intellective power abstracts (tujārīdu) its forms from matter, as we will soon explain. So it is simultaneously an active creator of the intelligible forms (khaliq fā‘ila lil-ṣuwar al-ma‘qīla) and a receiver of them.

Avicenna’s Emanated Abstraction

out our souls from potentiality into actuality with respect to the intelligibles. Alpina rightly describes the AI’s illumination as the cause of actualizing potential intelligibles in images, a process ‘which results in intellect’ (‘Intellectual Knowledge’, 168, emphasis mine). But the validation from the AI is the ‘conclusio of the intellective process’ (171, emphasis original). My point here holds even if the priority and posteriority are only logical, and not temporal.

28. Avicenna categorically rules out that we could bring ourselves from potentiality into actuality, e.g., in Najāt, 192–193, esp. 192.20–21, so the AI must do more than validate.

29. To be fair, Alpina states that he is offering a necessary but preliminary step towards a more comprehensive abstractionist reading (‘Intellectual Knowledge’, 171).

30. As does Taylor, “Avicenna ... Abstraction”, who has actually switched from the emanationist to the abstractionist side. For his now abandoned emanationist, see, e.g., ‘Al-Fārābī and Avicenna’, 182.

31. Psychology V.6, 239.3–6. For other texts, see, e.g., Psychology I.5, 48.1–5, Najāt, 165.4–6 (Rahman 33), Destination, ch. 2, 65.1–3; Psychology V.3, 221.17–222.4, Najāt, 182.5–9 (Rahman 54–55), Destination, ch. 6, 87; Psychology V.5, 236.11–20; Demonstration III.5, 222, esp. ll. 1–11, and IV.10, 331.5–10; Compendium on the Soul, ch. 8, 363.16–364.4; Pointers II.3.8, 370–371; Taqāliq (Marginal Notes on Aristotle’s De Anima), 23.3–9; Commentary on the Theology of Aristotle, 47.10–14 (transl. in D’Ancona, ‘Degrees of Abstraction’, 64). For several of these passages and others, full arguments in favor of abstractionism, see Hasse, ‘Abstraction’ and Gutas, ‘Empiricism’.

32. Emanationists disagree with abstractionists about Avicenna’s “degrees” or “grades of abstraction” in Psychology II.2, 58–61, Najāt, 168–171 (Rahman 38–40). Destination, ch. 3, 69, Avicenna declares that every kind of cognitive perception (whether sensation, imagination, estimation, or the intellect) involves a different type and level of abstraction (tajrīd) from matter and its conditions. Black, “Concepts”, 131–133, argues that Avicenna only means to indicate the differing states of mental objects once they’re received by a faculty, and not ‘any sort of stripping operation’ (133). When it comes to intellectual abstraction, however, Avicenna doesn’t just use “abstraction” terms (forms of jarrīd in Arabic, meaning “to strip” or “peel”). He uses other similarly active and operational language, e.g., the intellect “extracts” (tanzi‘u) the form from matter and its attachments (e.g., Psychology II.2, 61.11), “detaching” (turfizatu) it from all its accidents (ibid., 61.13–14). At least the kinds of abstraction in imagination and intellect must involve taking away some kind of material condition and not just receiving, since Avicenna actually says in Pointers that sensation does not abstract (la yu’jarīdu) the form (Pointers II.3.8, 369). Imagination partially abstracts it (from its occurrence in the world, but not from particularizing accidents) (370). Intellect abstracts it completely, “as if it works (‘amila) on the sensible, making it (‘a‘ala-hu) intelligible” (370, emphasis mine).

33. Mabda‘ uwar-l-Ma‘ād (The Beginning and Destination), hereafter (Beginning), III.5, 97.18–19. For a draft French translation of this work, part III from MSS, see Michot, Livre de la genèse et du retour. The forward reference (‘as we will soon explain’) is to III.7–8, which contain standard explanations of abstraction. In the Compendium, Avicenna argues explicitly that the intellectual power “acts” by “abstracting the form from matter”; it is thus “active (fā‘ila)”, whereas...
Furthermore, in the first quote from V.6, this final stage of intellectual abstraction is *constitutive* of the act of understanding; it is never described (as emanationists would have it) as merely preparatory.\(^\text{34}\) In the first quote and in many other places, Avicenna insists that such an activity of successful intellectual abstraction is necessary for gaining the intelligibles of material things (in contrast to purely immaterial beings), so we need a power of abstraction prior and in addition to our receptive intellect’s receiving intelligibles from the AI.\(^\text{35}\) While I do not think the distinction between the first acquisition of intelligibles (via abstraction) and their later recollection (via direct emanation) can bear all the burden that abstractionists have heretofore placed upon it, it is a distinction Avicenna himself draws.\(^\text{36}\) Thus, many emanationist texts where the AI unquestionably emanates intelligible forms can and should be read as instances of intellectual memory, which abstractionists and I both acknowledge (and which, I’ve argued above, accounts for a majority of human knowledge).\(^\text{37}\)

Nevertheless, abstractionists have either ignored or downplayed very strong texts supporting the emanative side which patently give the AI a crucial role even in the first acquisition of intelligibles (like *Psychology* V.5). Or they have rightly signaled the importance of these texts while still missing an adequate explanation of them. A true resolution, then, should aim to better explain the emanationist and abstractionist evidence, without reducing either to metaphor.

### II. Abstraction as an Emanated Power in the First Acquisition of Intelligibles

How then can the AI play a real, efficient causal role in the primary acquisition of intelligibles if it is not actually just beaming those intelligibles in act into human minds wholesale (as the traditional emanationist picture has held)? I think the key is that the fully actual AI moves our intellects into actuality by emanating not the intelligibles, but rather the *power* of abstraction itself, a power which unleashes the intelligibles in potency within images to become intelligibles in act. I first offer some considerable textual evidence for this idea in part A. Though none of these passages is categorically pellucid about what the emanated power is, in section B, I give even further textual and philosophical reasons for why the power must be that of abstraction.

#### A. Key Texts

I will first take a couple more vague but still highly suggestive passages from the *Shifā*; a text from the *Burhān (Demonstration)* and then the central text from *Psychology* V.5. After that, I offer two more explicit passages (from the *Najāt* and *Compendium*). In the part of the *Demonstration* containing Text 1, Avicenna discusses four ways we come to assent to intelligibles with the help of the senses. The first is just

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\[^{34}\text{Sensation is passive (363.22–364.2). I quote and discuss this passage later in the paper.}\]

\[^{35}\text{Preparation language is only used to describe the perusal and consultation of images, which is never described as “abstraction” at all (as we’ll see in texts below). Whatever Avicenna means by the last stage of intellectual abstraction, he is clear that it is something the human rational soul does, and it constitutes its own distinct level, different in kind from that of imagination or estimation (see fn. 32 above).}\]

\[^{36}\text{This is most patent from Avicenna’s insistence that the animal powers of sensation and imagination are necessary for first abstracting the intelligibles, but that, once obtained, the intellect can turn to itself without relying on the lower faculties (like a horse that is no longer needed once the rider reaches his destination) — *Psychology* V.3, esp. 221.15–222.4 and 222.15–223.10, *Najāt* 182 (Rahman 54–56). It is also evident in the transition from *Psychology* V.5 (first acquisition) to V.6 (intellectual memory and taking the intelligible “out of storage”). The distinction is also present in the stages of the intellect’s development after the material intellect, especially between the dispositional intellect (‘*aql bi-l-malaka*’ and the actual intellect (‘*aql bi-l-fīrād*’), since the former is a stage of acquiring intelligibles and the latter is ‘an intellect that understands when it wants without taking up the burden of acquiring [them]’, although it is not currently contemplating — *Psychology* I.5, 50.1; cf. *Najāt* 166.10–11 (Rahman 35). When a human being is actually contemplating a recalled intelligible (emanated from the AI), it is the acquired or “in-use” intellect (*mustafād*).}\]
the initial acquisition of the intelligibles via abstraction from images, which he calls the way "by accident":

1. The way by accident is to acquire from sensation (in the way we said) the singular intelligible intentions abstracted (al-maʾānī l-mujarrada l-maʿqāla mujarrada) from the mixture of sensation and retentive imagination. Then the intellect advances towards dividing (tafṣīl) some [intentions] from others and composing some with others. Following that is the precise operation of the intellect—by nature with respect to some [intentions], while it is dependent with respect to others—to the point of demonstration. The first step (al-qism al-awwal) of these two [stages] is by the intellect's contact (ittiṣāl) with a light from the maker emanating (bi-nūr min al-ṣānīʾ muḥāfād) upon the souls and nature. It [the maker] is called the Active Intellect, and it is the thing that brings the potential intellect to actuality. But even if that is so, sensation is a starting point for it by accident, and not essentially.\(^{39}\)

This is brief and complex, but it is a clear passage wherein the first acquisition of the intelligibles through abstraction is also simultaneously attributed to the emanation of light from the AI.\(^{40}\) The light is a power that moves the potential intellect to actuality and somehow assists in acquiring the intelligibles from sensory images, but the metaphor is not explained in detail.

\(^{38}\) The previous pages of Demonstration III.5 contain detailed descriptions of abstraction, which I'll come to below.

\(^{39}\) Demonstration III.5, 222.19–223.5, reading al-maʿqāla in the first line with Badawi 161.3. For a translation of this full chapter, see McGinnis and Reisman, Classical Arabic Philosophy, 152–156, esp. their alternative translation of the above passage on 155.

\(^{40}\) It is noteworthy that Avicenna attributes the first step to the AI's emanation. He goes on to describe the second step as the intellect's grasp of the middle term, which would be the more likely candidate for the AI's emanation if we followed the abstractionists' normal interpretation.

Similarly, as mentioned above, Avicenna emphasizes both abstraction and emanation in Psychology V.5. It goes further in support of my interpretation, though still using the metaphor of light.

2. [A] For when the intellective power (quwāt al-ʾaqlīyya) examines the particulars which are in retentive imagination, and the light of the Active Intellect in us (which we mentioned) shines on them, they [the particulars] are transformed into something abstracted from matter and its attachments (istāḥbālat mujarradaʾan al-māddā waʾalāʾiqi-hā), and they are impressed in the rational soul. [B] Not in the sense that they [the particulars] themselves are transferred from the imagination to our intellect, and not in the sense that the intention (al-maʾnā) immersed in the attachments [of matter]—which in itself and in consideration of its essence is abstract (mujarrad)—makes a copy (mithl) of itself. [C] Rather, [it is] in the sense that the perusal of them [the particulars in imagination] prepares the soul so that the abstract [light]\(^{41}\) from the Active Intellect emanates upon them (yafādaʾālāy-hā l-mujarradun min al-ʾaqlī l-faʿālī).

41. Much hangs on the translation of the highly ambiguous [C] and the participle al-mujarrad ("the abstract/abstracted" light/thing). I can find no other instance where Avicenna uses the singular participle by itself (a plural use, mujarradāt comes at the end of Text 2 and also in Pointers II.3.15, 403). Both 'light' and 'thing' are neutral as the supplied modified noun. 'Light' is a clear choice since the text repeatedly says that what the AI emanates is its light. Emanationists would read this 'abstract light' as the intelligible form; I will argue that it is the power of abstraction. Alternatively, the participle could be neutrally translated by itself as 'abstraction' (following the Latin translation, abstraction). Finally, I also want to point out that this passage could comprise even stronger evidence for my interpretation if we read here the active participle (al-mujarrad), rather than the passive participle (al-mujarrad): "... so that the abstracting [light] from the Active Intellect emanates upon them ...." The passive is certainly more common, though the active is attested in some dictionaries (J. Richardson, A Dictionary, 871; Catafago, An English and Arabic Dictionary, 224). This is a critical passage, and it would be unsurprising if Avicenna employed the rasm (the unvocalized skeleton of the written word in Arabic) in a somewhat rare (though clearly grammatically possible and philosophically rich) way, especially if the word is trying to express what I argue further below (on the basis of clearer texts) is the power of abstraction. I give...
... [D] Thus, when some relation to this form takes place for the rational soul through the mediation of the illumination of the Active Intellect, from it [i.e., the form] something of [the form’s] kind in one way and not of its kind in another occurs in [the soul], just as when light falls on colored things, it produces from them an effect in vision which is not identical with them [lit. “according to their totality’] in every way. Hence the images which are potentially intelligible become intelligible in actuality, not they themselves but rather what is collected (yultaqtu) from them. [E] But just as the effect coming, by the mediation of light, from the sensible forms is not itself those forms but rather something else, related to them, coming to be by the mediation of the light in the recipient facing [the enlightened objects], [F] so also when the rational soul examines these imaginative forms and the light of the Active Intellect hits upon a kind of contact with them, [the soul] is prepared so that the abstractions (mujarradāt) of these forms, out of [their material] admixtures, occur within it through the light of the Active Intellect.42

Both abstractionists and emanationists have claimed this passage as key support. Black, as an emanationist, argues that [B] and [C] prove that Avicenna rejects abstraction.43 In [B], he certainly rules out two possibilities. First, it cannot be that the image itself (as a material particular) somehow gets transferred to the intellect (which cannot receive particulars but only universal intelligible forms). The second option might seem to describe abstraction; however, a closer reading reveals that Avicenna is denying only that the intention (ma nā) itself, i.e., the essential intelligible content contained potentially in the image, could make the right kind of copy of itself. If that were the case, we would not need the AI or abstraction to acquire intelligibles; the inten-
tions could just act on themselves and bring themselves into actuality (which Avicenna argues is impossible just on the previous page!)

Avicenna is not, however, denying that something intellectually in act could abstract it and make an actually intelligible copy of that inten-
tion, as in true abstraction. That Avicenna is willing to affirm exactly this is shown in [D] and [E]: not the exact imaginative form, but a similar, now intelligible and numerically distinct copy of that form’s essential content (of its kind in one way and not of its kind in another) is “collected (yultaqtu) from them [the images]” and is impressed on the intellect.44 Avicenna argues that this is just like the copied likeness of color impressed on the eye in vision, and this comparison is telling.45 The images should be just like colored objects in the world, namely the originating sources that are directly causally connected (thanks to the right kind of light) to the appropriate cognized form in act. The analogy with vision therefore rules out deflationary emanationist readings of how the intelligible is “collected from” the images, unless they also want to claim that the sun directly emanates the visible forms into our eyes after having been merely prepared by turning to the similarly colored objects in experience.46 Against the abstractionists, however, Avi-

42. Psychology V.5, 235.2–8, 235.10–236.2.

44. Avicenna explicitly affirms in a previous chapter (V.3) “the mind’s extraction (intiza’) of the singular universals from the particulars, by way of abstracting (tajrid) their intentions (maʾani-hā) from matter and from the attachments of matter” (221.19–222.1). Similarly, he refers to the external “thing from which [the abstracted form] is taken (al-ma khudiḥ)” in V.2, 214.9.

45. In Psychology III.7, Avicenna describes the parallel process in sensation in the exact same way (though obviously at a lower degree of abstraction): Vision receives in itself a form from the visible object which is a likeness (mushakala) of the form in it [the object], but not its very form. This [is the case] with the thing that is sensed by being brought near, like the object of smell and of touch. For the sensing [power] does not strip (yastubu) that [object’s] form [itself], but rather only a copy (mithil) of the [object’s] form exists in [the power]. (141.18–142.1, emphasis mine). I discuss the analogy further below in section IV.

46. Hasse, ‘Abstraction’, 57, makes a similar point. In other words, just as there is both an agreement of quiddity and a direct causal connection between the
cenna repeatedly describes the emanated light of the AI as enabling the first abstraction of the intelligibles in [A], [C], [D], and [F].

In favor of my own view, in addition to the evidence that both abstraction and emanation are equally co-efficient causes, Avicenna states in [A] that the light of the Active Intellect in us transforms imaginative particulars “into something abstracted from matter and its attachments”. This strongly indicates (as in Text 1 above) that the light of the AI should be identified with the power of abstraction. Avicenna further claims in [C] that an “abstract [light]” (or perhaps even “abstracting [light]” or “abstraction”47) emanates “from the Active Intellect”. Text 2 thus supports my claim that abstraction is a power emanated from the AI. The line in [C], however, is ambiguous, and the metaphors of light are still thick.

Nevertheless, there are places where Avicenna goes beyond the metaphor and tells us that when he speaks of the light from the AI, he means precisely a power which, I argue, must perform the activity of abstraction. The Najāt is explicit:

3. The relation of this thing [the AI] to our souls which are intellect in potentiality and to the intelligibles which are potential intelligibles is [like] the relation of the sun to our powers of vision (abṣārnā) which are seeing (raʿiyya) in potentiality and to the colors which are potentially visible (mar ʿiyya). For when contact (ittiṣāl) with the potentially visible things [occurs] from this effect (al-athar), i.e., the ray (al-shuʿāʾ), they become actually visible, and the power of vision becomes actually seeing. In the same way, a power (quawwa) emanates (tafīḍu) from this Active Intellect,

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proceeding to the objects of the imagination which are potentially intelligible, and it [the power]48 makes them (tajʿalu-hā) actually intelligible. And it makes the potential intellect an actual intellect.49

He also confirms this in the early work, The Compendium on the Soul:

4. [The divine emanation of the AI] stands to the rational soul in the [same] relation as light to vision, except that light emanates upon vision the power of perceiving only (al-dawʿ yafīḍu lil-baṣr al-quawwa alā l-idrāk faqāṭ), not the perceptible form. But this substance [the AI] emanates (yafīḍu) by its essence alone the power of perception (al-quwwa alā l-idrāk) upon the rational power, and it causes the perceptible form to come about (yuḥaṣṣilu) in it also, as we explained.50

Avicenna in the last sentence means ‘power of perception’ in the broader sense of intellectual perception. So Text 4 is an early key that the light metaphor (seen in the other texts) generally signals an emanated power of intellectual perception.

B. The Emanated Power Is Abstraction

The texts above already intimate that the explicitly emanated power (Texts 3 and 4) — and, by extension, the light from the AI (Texts 1 and 2) — is the power of abstraction. But an emanationist might challenge my interpretation by objecting that the emanated power is not

48. All contemporary editions of the Najāt (Kurdī, Daneshpazuh, and Fakhry) print the verb as taʿ alu (feminine), and the parallel in Destination is the same. The verb is transitive with the imaginative objects as the clearly implied object, so it cannot be read passively (taʿ ilu) with the images as the subject. On this basis, the subject must be the power (quawwa, f.) and not the AI (ʿaql).

49. Najāt, 193.6–11, Destination, ch. 12, 112.1–6. See Rahman’s alternative translation, Avicenna’s Psychology, 69. The first part of the passage, the comparison of the AI to the sun, is basically repeated in Psychology V.5 just prior to where I begin Text 2.

50. Compendium, ch. 10, 371.8–11.
abstraction but the power of intellect or understanding, which is just the intelligible in act emanated directly from the AI.\footnote{51} I will defend against this objection here, offering first general reasons in light of all the texts we’ve just seen, then giving some specific reasons related to Text 4, which requires further explanation.

The first general reason to think that the emanated light and power is abstraction is a textual point, based on the proximate context of the above passages. The pages and lines immediately prior to Text 1 in Demonstration III.5 contain quintessential and detailed descriptions of the intellect’s abstraction of intelligibles from sensory images: “[T]he intellect makes [sensibles] (yaj’ alu-ha) to become intelligible because it abstracts (mujarradu) their true [essences] from the attachments of matter”; it finds variously related images with their material accidents, and it “extracts” (yanzi’u) and “peels” (yaqshiru) them away, thereby acquiring the intelligible intention.\footnote{52} When Text 1 begins with a brief allusion to abstraction, it references this immediately preceding discussion (“in the way we said”), and this is the process that the emanated light from the AI enables. Immediately after Text 2, Avicenna discusses a similar process of “extracting” (tanzi’u) accidents from essences when the intellect is presented with similar images and “grasps” (akhadha) a single “abstracted” (mujarrad) intention.\footnote{53} After that, at the beginning of V.6, Avicenna makes a striking summary remark reaffirming that “the soul understands … by abstraction (tajrid),” as quoted above.\footnote{54} Both texts 2 and 4 are preceded by discussions of abstraction two chapters prior in their respective works, separated mainly by arguments concerning the immateriality of the human soul.\footnote{55} Abstraction is mentioned in all these surrounding places; the AI’s emanation of forms is entirely absent.\footnote{56} This makes sense if the AI’s emanation is not the proximate mechanism whereby we first procure the intelligible forms for ourselves (which is why abstraction seems sufficient in the nearby passages), but is rather the source of that very power (which is why the AI is introduced in the texts).

The second general reason to suppose that the emanated power is not the emanationist’s intelligible form (but rather the power of abstraction) is precisely that it is a power, compared to our own power of vision (explicitly in Text 4, and implicitly in Texts 2 and 3). Our power of vision is something that we employ ourselves and must turn towards the visible objects, even once illuminated. Abstraction, similarly, has to be further employed and directed towards the images, and we see this comparison in Text 2, [E].\footnote{57} If the AI emanated intelligible forms in act to the intellect, however, there would be no further employment in the moment of first learning. Emanationists, after all, hold that “abstraction” and attention to images are prior preparation to the reception, not something that would come after. Put another way, the powers of vision and abstraction are both capacities that require distinct objects; the proposed “power of intellect” from the emanationist objector is not like that since it just is the objects/forms themselves in complete actuality. We should not forget the essential linguistic and philosophical relationship between a power and potentiality (both expressed ambiguously in Arabic, as in other classical languages, by the same term, quawwāl). When Avicenna discusses the stages of the development of the human intellect, he enumerates three different levels of potentiality: the material, dispositional, and actual intellects. And intention from accidents and separates accidents from essences. Related to Text 4, see Compendium, ch. 8. Abstraction is also briefly mentioned in ch. 9, 365, esp. ll. 13–14. I further discuss the Compendium connections below.

\footnote{56} Of course, Avicenna goes on to mention the AI’s emanation when discussing intellectual memory in Psychology V.6, but that is a new topic. And even so, after Text 2 (which ends at the beginning of p. 236 in Rahman’s edition), the AI is not mentioned again until V.6, p. 243 (by implication).

\footnote{57} See McGinnis, ‘Making Abstraction’, 175.
when he comes to the last step, the acquired intellect (mustafād) which receives and actively contemplates the (recalled) intelligible in “absolute actuality” from the AI, he does not call it a power at all, nor does he describe it with any language of potentiality.  

Third, and closely related to the second reason, Avicenna says the emanated power/light has to proceed to and fall upon the images in order for understanding to occur (in Text 3 and Text 2, [A], [C], [F]). Such a further engagement with images would be otiose and unfitting on an emanationist account, wherein an intelligible form in act is bestowed directly to the human intellect. There would be no need (and no way) for the power of intellect/intellection (understood as the intelligible in act) to emanate onto the imagination.

Fourth and most importantly, the emanated power in Texts 2 and 3 somehow acts on the images in order to produce understanding. Text 3 relates that it is the emanated power that then makes the objects in imagination (taj’ alu-hā) actually intelligible, perfectly matching the description of abstraction as “making” from Demonstration III.5 quoted above. Similarly in Text 2, the power/light emanated from the AI transforms the imaginative particulars [A] and collects the intelligibles from them [D]. Though perhaps less clear, Text 1 also suggests that the light emanated from the AI is involved in acquiring and abstracting intelligibles “from the mixture of sensation and retentive imagination”. I do not see how an emanated intelligible in absolute actuality could (or would need to) perform such a rendering from the images, though this description makes perfect sense if the power is abstraction.

Now let me provide two more reasons related specifically to Text 4. First, contra the emanationist objection, the emanated power in Text 4, insofar as it is likened to vision, is contrasted (not identified!) with the AI’s emanation of intelligible forms. The AI emanates two distinct things: the power of intellectual perception and sometimes, in addition, certain intelligible forms. What are these forms and why should we think Avicenna is contrasting them with the power? The earlier context of Compendium, ch. 10, from which Text 4 is taken, and also ch. 8, make clear that these forms are actually self-evident primary intelligibles (e.g., “the whole is greater than the part”), which occur at some point in a person’s intellectual development “without learning or deliberation”. In ch. 10, Avicenna argues that these primary intelligibles cannot come from “sensation and experience”, but must arrive from “divine emanation”. In ch. 8 also, he distinguishes directly emanated primary intelligible forms from others that we gain from sensory experience (and for which we need a power of abstraction, as I’ll show further below):

[The intelligible forms] are obtained in [the human intellect] in two ways. One of them is through divine inspiration (ilhām) without learning or use of the senses, like the self-evident intelligibles, such as our belief that the whole is greater than the part …. The second is through syllogistic acquisition and demonstrative discovery … [There follows a long list of possible non-self-evident intelligibles in every science, including logic, physics, and metaphysics.] The power that conceptualizes these [latter] intentions acquires intelligible forms from sensation by an inherent nature ….  

59. See again the reference to the human intellective soul as an “active creator” in Beginning III.5 and the other citations quoted at fns. 32 and 33 above.
60. Quoted at fn. 52. This is also the exact language used by Aristotle to describe light’s activation of colors in De Anima III.5, 430a16–17 (poiet); Arabic, 75 (taj’ alu). It then becomes traditional vocabulary for abstraction and making potential intelligibles actual: see, e.g., Alexander of Aphrodisias, De Intellectu, 108.3–7; Arabic, 34.3–7, esp. In. 6 (yaj’ alu-hā); Themistius, De Anima Paraphrase, 100.2–3; Arabic, 181.5–6 (yaf’ alu-hā); al-Fārābī, Political Regime, 35–36, esp. 35.2–6.
62. Ibid. 370.8–11. The way the AI emanates the primary intelligibles in this early work stands in some contrast to what Avicenna says elsewhere — see Gutas, AAT, 194–195, and “Empiricism”, §V.
63. Compendium, ch. 8, 361.10–362.18, emphasis mine, reading the last line according to Ahwani’s edition (bi-jibilla ghariziga), 169.10. For another translation of
This second method accounts for the formation of essential and accidental “single universal intelligible forms”, such as “donkey”, “black”, etc., and Avicenna says this occurs for the rational soul “through the service of the animal powers and the help (iʿāna) of the Universal Intellect [i.e., the Al].”64 He then identifies this second way of gaining intelligibles from sensation as “abstraction” (tajrid).65 I’ll focus more on abstraction below, but for now, we can see from this wider context that Text 4 appeals to these two distinct ways of gaining intelligibles, one through the power (which “acquires intelligible forms from sensation” and is compared to vision), another by the Al’s direct emanation of self-evident intelligible forms. The power is what grounds the likeness to vision, the directly emanated forms make it different. Thus, the power cannot be any kind of directly emanated forms.66

Another reason, already briefly indicated above, in direct support of emanated abstraction (my own view) is that the emanated “power of [intellectual] perception (idrak)” in Text 4 must be abstraction because Avicenna explicitly identifies it as abstraction in ch. 8 of the same work:

The intellectual powers (al-qawāʿ id-ʿaqliyya) only perceive (tudriku) by assimilation of the intelligible, and this assimilation is the abstraction (tajrid) of the form from matter and cohesion with it … [The intellectual power] itself

some of this same text, including a full translation of the long omitted list of the acquired intelligibles in every science, see Gutas, AAT, 5–7.

64. Compendium, ch. 10, 363, esp. ll. 4 and 8.
65. Ibid., 363.17–18 and ff. See the next point in my argument and the following note.
66. Nowhere in the Compendium does the Al emanate any other forms than the self-evident primary intelligibles. He mentions only a “contact” with the Al in the very rare case of prophets (ch. 8, 364.10–365.4, transl. in Gutas, AAT, 8); however, that does not concern the first acquisition of simple intelligibles. In ch. 8, the Al “helps” in the process of gaining intelligibles from sensation, but as helper, it is not the most proximate or primary cause. So this role of the Al seems better explained by Text 4, namely that it aids us by emanating the power of abstraction.

Note again how abstraction is active and constitutive of the act of intellelction; it is not merely receptive, nor is it preparatory. This passage shows how Avicenna in Text 4 refers back (“as we explained”) to both the emanated primary intelligibles (earlier in ch. 10 and ch. 8) and abstraction (as the obvious power of intellectual perception in the quote above, ch. 8).68 Avicenna also identifies the power of intellectual perception as abstraction in the Psychology. He argues that “all perception (idrak) … of a material thing is a grasp of the thing’s form abstracted (mujarrada) from matter in some manner of abstraction (tajridan).”69 More specifically, the intellectual faculty “perceives (tudriku) the form by grasping it completely abstracted (mujarradan) from matter in every way … It extracts (tantaziʿu) [the form] from matter”.70

Thus, the power of intellectual perception in Text 4 must be the power of abstraction (completely abstracting the form from material attachments), and not a directly emanated intelligible form in act. Of course, abstraction is something we do. But Text 4 also tells us that this power of abstraction is emanated from the Al, likely elucidating the “help” that the Al provides in acquiring intelligibles from sense experience (also mentioned in ch. 8). This identification of the power of intellectual perception with abstraction in the Compendium and Psychology offers additional proof that the emanated power in Text 3 (which “makes” imaginative forms intelligible) and that the light from the Al in Texts 2 and 1 are also the power of abstraction.

68. Hasse, “Abstraction”, 45–46, also links the passages in chs. 8 and 10, though he overlooks Avicenna’s reference to emanated forms.
69. Psychology II.2, 58.4–7. Thus, Avicenna introduces his grades of abstraction. See fn. 32 above.
70. Psychology II.2, 61.8–9, 11. Cf. Destination, ch. 3, 72–73, Najāt, 171 (Rahman, 40).
In light of all these reasons and the weight of Avicenna’s repeated texts which testify to abstraction as that which renders potential intelligibles in imagination into actual intelligibles, we should conclude that the emanated light and power in Texts 1–4 is the power of abstraction; hence, *emanated abstraction*. Thus far, Avicenna’s theory (on my view) actually bears a much closer resemblance to al-Fārābī’s, who in *On Intellect* and other works also may think of abstraction as an emanated power from the AI, though the latter’s doctrine is comparatively far less developed.\(^7\) It also bears a significant resemblance to Themistius’s account, though it seems further removed (both temporally and doctrinally) from Themistius than al-Fārābī.\(^7\) So while not entirely un precedent, Avicenna fully develops his own account of emanated abstraction which allows us to perfectly harmonize his emanationist and abstractionist elements.

**III. Other Objections**

I think the texts above clearly show, contra abstractionists, that Avicenna gives the AI a role in the first acquisition of intelligibles (not just in recollection) by emanating the power of abstraction. Although I have also now defended against the emanationist idea that the emanated power could be anything else (particularly, the intelligible forms in act), there are at least two more emanationist objections (and one further general objection) to consider.

**A. The AI as Giver of Powers?**

Avicenna’s title for the AI in his *Physics* and *Metaphysics* is often “the Giver of Forms” (*al-wāḥib al-ṣawwar*). The traditional title and function for which the natural constitution (*khilqa*) of a house and of a statue could not come about without the crafts — through their corresponding materials — giving them their [i.e., the crafts’] powers (*tutfūda-humā quwwata-hā*) and implanting in them the craft’s form. Thus they make the composite house and statue. So also the potential intellect must be perfected only by another intellect and only by what is already actual, and not potential. (Arabic, 174–177, following Lyons’s suggested correction, *quwwata-hā, 175*, fn. 3, rather than the MS’s *quwwata-huma*)

Though a very interesting parallel, in Themistius this analogy of craft giving its power is quick and deliberately superseded by his famous idea that the AI is “not outside the potential intellect” (like craft and its matter); rather, the AI itself “completely enters into the potential intellect” and “becomes one with it” (Arabic, 179.11–17; cf. Grk., 99.13–18). This is different from Avicenna and al-Fārābī, though he does also describe the AI as illuminating/shining on the potential intellect, using the analogy of the sun (albeit with no exact “emanation” language). In addition, the doctrine of abstraction in Themistius is limited when compared to Avicenna and al-Fārābī, confined to occasional remarks, e.g., the intellect ‘makes (*gāy alu-ha*) the rest of the [potential] intelligibles intelligible by its isolation (*bi-frādihi*) of them from matter’ — Arabic, 181.5–6; Grk., 100.2–3 (cf. Arabic, 167.8–11; Grk., 98.1–2; plausibly implied at Arabic, 178.4–179.9; Grk., 98.34–99.10). Although full discussion of Avicenna’s most similar predecessors (al-Fārābī and Themistius) is beyond the scope of this article, I will note some other similarities and divergences in notes below.

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\(^7\) The most pregnant parallel passage is al-Fārābī’s *On Intellect*, 26–27, esp. 27.3–7:

Just as the sun is what gives the eye actual vision and what [makes potentially] visible things actually visible through the light it gives to [vision], so also the Active Intellect is that which makes the potential intellect an actual intellect through the principle (*al-mabda*) it gives to [the potential intellect]. And by that same [principle] the [potential] intelligibles become actual intelligibles.

It is reasonable (as in the case of Avicenna above) to infer that this “principle” is the power of abstraction, since al-Fārābī earlier describes the latter as the activity by which the intellect renders potential intelligibles into actual ones, by “extracting” (*tuntazi’a*) them from matter (*On Intellect*, 16–17, 19–20). Cf. *The Political Regime*, 35.12–36.5, and *The Perfect State*, 198–203. See also Taylor, “Abstraction in al-Fārābī,” esp. 153–156; Davidson, *Alfarabi*, ch. 3 (esp. 53 and 69) and 93; and Hasse, “Avicenna on Abstraction,” 41–43. Taylor explicitly (and Davidson more implicitly) interprets the ability to abstract as itself emanated from the AI. Though Hasse is probably also correct when he concludes that “al-Fārābī’s remarks on abstraction remain sketchy and are in danger of being overinterpreted” (43). For more on al-Fārābī’s notion of abstraction and his likely use of both Alexander of Aphrodisias and Themistius, see Taylor, “Avicenna ... Abstraction,” esp. 82; Geoffroy, “La tradition arabe du *Peri nou* d’Alexandre d’Aphrodisie et les origines de la théorie farabienne des quatre degrés de l’intellect”; and Davidson, *Alfarabi*, 50–51.

Taylor, “Avicenna ... Abstraction,” esp. 72–76, makes an important case for the similarities between Avicenna and Themistius with respect to abstraction and the AI’s active role; see also Davidson’s summary of Themistius in *Alfarabi*, 26–27. The most significant point of comparison (from my standpoint, though not mentioned by Taylor or Davidson) is *De Anima Paraphrasis*, 98.19–32 (Arabic, 172–177; Todd transl. from the Grk., 122–123). Themistius argues:

This is like a potential house and potential statue (i.e., stone and copper)
of the AI as Giver of Forms arguably fit seamlessly with the classic emanationist interpretation: The AI is the single Giver of physical, metaphysical, and intelligible forms. So why think the AI could emanate a power like abstraction, or any other powers? First, powers are also a certain kind of form, and in one context within his physical works, Avicenna explicitly states that the AI is the emanator of forms and powers:

5. There is one explanation for all [cases of powers]. It is that the composite body is prepared by its mixture for receiving a disposition, a form, or a specific power (to the exclusion of any other), which is emanated (yuṣūfu dū) upon it from the Giver of Forms and Powers (wāḥib al-ṣuwār wa-l-qawālī). The emanating of [the Giver of Forms and Powers] is from its liberality (jūdi-hi), because it does not cease [emanating] to a thing that is duly prepared.

This link to the AI’s other metaphysical role in Avicenna’s system provides further significant support for my claim that the AI can emanate specific forms (like the power of abstraction) to suitably prepared sublunar beings, and this emanation of powers can, in turn, generally explain certain types of change, including the movement of potential intelligibles into actuality. While there remain questions I cannot address here about how the AI emanates and causes specific forms and powers, Text 5 demonstrates that my emanated abstraction interpretation dovetails with Avicenna’s broader metaphysical system; so consideration of the latter does not pose a distinct advantage for emanationism over my view (as I think it does against abstractionism).

Still, one might object that Text 5 is too general. Though Avicenna thinks the AI emanates some powers, does it emanate all cognitive powers? If Avicenna thinks that every type of perception is a kind of abstraction (as he says when discussing the grades of abstraction), does the AI emanate those other psychological powers of lesser abstraction on humans and non-human animals, too? In fact, in the lines immediately prior to Text 5, Avicenna seems to admit just this. He is urging a unified account of powers (whether heat, magnets, or anything else) such that “the mixture is the cause for the attainment in the composite of a power which by its essence and nature” performs the relevant act:

The attraction of magnets is not more wondrous than plants which grow, or the sensation of what senses, or the motion of what moves voluntarily. The drop in estimation regarding the wonder of [the latter items] is [due to] their frequency and high probability. [Beginning of

76. Further complicating this issue and the emanationist argument from parallelism, there is debate regarding exactly how (or even whether) the Giver of Forms emanates the form in cases of substantial generation, some arguing that Avicenna holds the form is, rather, educed from matter; see K. Richardson, ‘Avicenna and Aquinas on Form and Generation’. It is true that Avicenna uses some of the same language from the Physics and Metaphysics also in epistemological contexts, speaking of “helping,” accidental, or “preparatory” causes of understanding. That might seem to point towards the AI as the true perfecting cause that really provides the form (as arguably happens in the ontological case): see, e.g., Demonstration III.5, 222.12–13 (a “helping power” vs. an “acting power”), Text 1 (“the way by accident”), or Text 2 (general “preparation” language). However, Avicenna never uses this language about intellectual abstraction; it is only used to describe the perusal of images (Text 2) or the general “help” from the bodily powers (Psychology V.3, 221.14–18, 222.16–17; this seems implied also in Demonstration, 222.14 and Text 1). In fact, Avicenna sometimes even names the Active Intellect (not abstraction) as providing the “help” (i ‘īna) for what is properly our own intellect’s grasp of the forms (as seen above in Compendium, chs. 8, 363.8). Emanated abstraction makes sense of this evidence: It is the perusal of images (not abstraction) that prepares us to receive (not the forms, but) the power of abstraction from the assisting AI.

73. This idea is well-argued in Black, “Concepts”, 129–130, and Davidson, Alfarabi, 102.
74. Shīfā, al-Tabi‘iyyāt (Physics), IV.15, 516.
Avicenna includes here the power of sensation as coming from the Giver of Forms and Powers. In *Beginning*, Avicenna argues that the AI (along with the human rational soul) is the cause of the lower “psychological powers” in the human being, and is the sole cause of those powers in non-humans. In his *Metaphysics* also, Avicenna argues that the AI is the cause of the existence of the psychological powers, and even the power or disposition for virtue in good human beings.

We’ve already seen above in the key texts that the AI is also responsible for emanating some kind of intellectual power on us. In fact, Avicenna in *Psychology* V.6 strikingly refers to the AI as the Giver of Intellect, mirroring the title Giver of Forms:

> 6. Thus, when one learns, it will be in his nature that when something connected to the sought intelligible comes to his mind and the soul turns towards theoretical inquiry — towards theoretical inquiry which is the return to the principle *Giver of Intellect* (al-mabda’ al-wāhib lil-aql) [i.e., the AI] — he will make contact with it [the AI], and then the power of abstract intellect (jawwāt al-‘aql al-mujarrad) will emanate (fādat) from [the AI], which is followed by the emanating of division (al-taṣfīl).

This quote occurs in a highly complex passage in the midst of Avicenna’s arguments concerning intellectual memory. Though I lack the space for a full exposition of this passage, my view is that the crucial “power of abstract intellect” also refers to abstraction and first grasping an intelligible.

Briefly, in favor of my preferred reading, the context is specifically one of learning, even “first learning” (as Avicenna says in following lines). The language of the power as “abstract” (mujarrad) is not decisive either way, since, as I will argue below, the power of abstraction must itself possess intelligibility or abstractness in order to bring potential intelligibles into actuality. Finally, Avicenna does not say in this quote that the AI emanates forms. Even the mention of “division” (al-taṣfīl) at the end is the term for another intellectual process or power of making something divided. Abstraction of intelligibles followed by division is also the ordering implied in *Psychology* V.6 and described in the *Demonstration* (at the beginning of Text 1 and in *Demonstration* IV.10): By extracting (tanzī’u) from accidental features and abstracting (tujarridu) the essential intelligible form, the intellect conceptualizes simple intelligibles (tasawwāru’ul-basā’īt) and then proceeds

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78. *Beginning* III.11, 107 (Michot, 72).


80. This is a slightly different Arabic formulation, with lil-aql. But the preposition li-, though often indicating the indirect object of w-h-b (‘to give’), can be used for the genitive and for taking the direct object (esp. when there are not two stated objects), as we see in other clear cases in Avicenna, e.g., *Metaphysics* IX.5.4, 335 (Anawati, 411): something suitable prepared receives the appropriate form “from the principles that are Givers of Forms (min al-auwā’il al-wāhiba lil-sawār)” (Marmura transl. modified). So “Giver of Intellect” is the correct translation here.

81. *Psychology* V.6, 247.6–9. See Janssens, ‘Notions’, 560–561, who notes that the phrase “Giver of Intellect” (wāhib al-‘aql) is also used in several laudatory closings of some works and parts of works, e.g., *Madkhal*, 87.18. He mentions this similar occurrence in *Psychology* V.6 but is certainly right that the other cases refer to God. Even if the closing encomia refer directly to God, the phrase still bears close connotations to the AI. God is the ultimate and remote ‘Giver of Intellect’, just as he is the giver of all being: however, the AI is the more proximate source for these emanated realities. This is evinced in *Actions and Affections*, where shortly after Text 5, which names the AI the Giver of Forms and Powers, Avicenna also says that every ‘active power’ is ‘a gift (hiba) from God’ — *Actions and Affections* II.1, 256.13–14.

82. *Psychology* V.6, 247.11.

83. Again, nothing prevents the possible translation ‘the power of abstracting (mujarrid) intellect’ with the active participle, especially if I am right about the previous texts and the power of abstraction. See fn. 41 above. But my interpretation does not depend on this.

84. *Psychology* V.6 begins with a summary of abstraction (quoted above at fn. 31), and then proceeds to discuss three types of conceptualization which come after, the first of which is the “division (al-taṣfīl)” and “organization (al-nizām)” of intelligibles (241.6–11 and 242.6–7).
to dividing (taṣṣil) them from one another and composing them. Since the “power of abstract intellect” in Text 6 is followed by division, this is a major clue that the former is the power of abstraction.

Text 6, therefore, comprises another significant piece of prima facie evidence for emanated abstraction. But even if it concerns recollection, it would still support my view that the AI emanates intellectual powers. The contention that the AI emanates powers, including all types of cognitive and intellectual powers, is on solid footing. In Texts 5 and 6, we see that Avicenna can equally call the AI the Giver of Powers, of Intellect, and of the power of abstract intellect.

B. Emanationist Evidence

There are other texts that seem to indicate that the AI emanates intelligible forms into human intellects. As I mentioned in section I, a majority of these emanationist texts can be explained along typical abstractionist lines by appealing to Avicenna’s own distinction between first acquiring an intelligible and later recalling it, where, in the latter, the AI’s emanating the form is uncontroversial. There are, however, one or two passages that do not as obviously concern intellectual memory. For example, in Psychology V.5, Avicenna says:

So here there is a cause which brings out our souls from potentiality into actuality with respect to the intelligibles. Since it [the AI] is the cause in providing (iṭā) the intellectual forms, it is nothing but an actual intellect in which the principles of intellectual forms are abstract, and its relation to our souls is that of the sun to our powers of vision.86

Similarly, the Najāt: “[The AI] gives (yuṣīdu) the soul and imprints on it the intelligible forms from its substance.”87 Both of these quotes occur shortly before Texts 2 and 3, respectively, so they deserve some response.88

First, both quotes come at the beginning of their very similar respective chapters where Avicenna commences by making a general point: The human potential intellect has to be brought out from that potentiality into actuality by a cause that is fully actual. This general argument applies to every potential stage of the human intellect, from first acquisition of the intelligibles to recollection. In every case, the AI is the ultimate cause for this transition into actuality. Thus, to speak of the AI as providing the intelligible forms is appropriate because he means for this explanation to apply also to cases of direct emanation (intellectual memory); we can only recall a previously grasped intelligible from a source in which that intelligible resides in eternal abstractness.

But these opening general statements are also true of the first acquisition of intelligibles at least as a shorthand description. Just like Avicenna also describes God as the (remote) giver of powers right after Text 5 in Actions and Affections,89 on these rare occasions Avicenna can say the AI emanates the intelligibles in first learning, but only remotely, i.e., in virtue of emanating the power of abstraction to us, which then produces the intelligibles from the images. In other words, the AI in each case gives (what is responsible for) the intelligibles, as seen in the more vague first line of the quote from V.5 above: “… with respect to (fi) the intelligibles”. In these passages at the beginning of their respective chapters, Avicenna is not primarily concerned with the distinction between first acquisition and recollection, but rather

85. Demonstration IV.10, 331.5–10. See Strobino, “Principles of Scientific Knowledge and the Psychology of Their Intellecction”, 37–40, for a full translation and an excellent description of this process. Though Strobino struggles to reconcile Demonstration IV.10 with Psychology V.5, my explanation of these texts and V.6 makes them all compatible.

86. Psychology V.5, 234.17–19.

87. Najāt 192.21–22, reading “its substance” with the MSS as reported by Rahman in Avicenna’s Psychology, 125, ch. 16, n. 2.

88. It is surprising that few abstractionists and even emanationists have dealt directly with these quotes. The first quote from Psychology V.5 is at least mentioned by Alpina, “Intellectual Knowledge”, 160, and Sebti, “L’Analogie de la lumière dans la noétique d’Avicenne”, 14, fn. 18.

89. See fn. 81.
with the AI's ultimate causality with respect to the intelligibles, as that which is in itself fully actual, both intellect and intelligible.

Second, it is crucial that these quotes precede Texts 2 and 3, which end up moving their respective chapters away from generality and towards specific consideration of the first acquisition of intelligibles from images. Images are not necessary for cases of recollection, and it seems clear that in the Psychology, at least, V.5 concerns first acquisition and V.6 concerns kinds of conceptualization that follow upon that acquisition (including intellectual memory). Once Avicenna delves into the specific details of first acquisition, the analogy of the sun and vision becomes the regulative model, as he says immediately in the V.5 quote above (and soon after the quote from the Najāt, discussed more below). Consequently, in neither Text 2 nor 3 does he say that the AI emanates the intelligible or abstract forms (just as the sun does not emanate the sensible forms). Rather, what is emanated is a power, which I’ve argued cannot be the forms and must be abstraction. The two quotes above are to my mind the strongest direct evidence for emanationism, but both can be adequately explained as general shorthand remarks that are promptly clarified by more precise statements following the sun analogy (in Texts 2 and 3), which support emanated abstraction.

C. Why Doesn’t Avicenna Say What He Means?

Though the texts I’ve canvassed are very strong evidence for emanated abstraction, none of them are utterly transparent. Why doesn’t Avicenna explicitly say: “The AI emanates the power of abstraction (al-quwāt al-tajrīd)?” I think this is primarily because he has already argued extensively prior to each of the key texts above that human beings acquire the intelligible forms at first by abstracting them from sense images. He might also worry that the explicit formulation above could give the false impression that the AI is doing the abstracting and not we ourselves (a problem I discuss further below). Besides, even al-quwāt al-tajrīd would not be wholly unambiguous because Avicenna sometimes uses tajrīd (normally “abstraction”, i.e., the process or power) as a virtual synonym of the passive al-mujarrad (something in an “abstract” or “abstracted” state).⁹⁰

As I just hinted in section B above, a similar question arises just as easily for emanationists regarding the key texts. Why doesn’t Avicenna explicitly say: “The AI emanates the abstract form or intelligible”, as he does when speaking more generally (in the two quotes in B) or about intellectual memory? As I have tried to show throughout, both abstractionism and emanationism face serious textual difficulties. This is why the debate is so entrenched and why so many interpreters have sought for a way to uphold somehow both realities in Avicenna’s corpus. My emanated abstraction view does a better job of explaining all the ambivalent evidence.

IV. What Is Abstraction and How Does It Work?

As seen above, Avicenna begins key chapters on intellection in the Psychology and Najāt with general considerations of the AI’s causality in bringing our intellects to actuality. Thinking about the AI’s causality and the sun analogy can help us better understand what abstraction is and how it works. These details will provide some final vindication for emanated abstraction.

See again the Najāt Text 3 above. There, Avicenna does not say that the AI magically gives us some radically new power, like Peter Parker being bitten by a radioactive spider. If that were the case, why wouldn’t it give us cooler powers, like the ability to understand all forms or to think unceasingly? Avicenna is working firmly within the Aristotelian act-potency tradition. While our intellectual souls are embodied, we unfortunately do not have the right potentiality for such cooler powers. We do, however, have a genuinely immaterial potential intellect and the potentiality of the forms of imagination within us, which contain the essences in themselves, i.e., the intentions (ma’ānin), which are potentially intelligible. Avicenna continues in that same passage of the Najāt:

⁹⁰ See Pointers III.7, 241, which I discuss further in a footnote below.
7. And just as the sun is visible in itself and a cause [of visibility] because it makes the potentially visible actually visible, so also this substance [the AI] is intelligible in itself and a cause [of intelligibility] because it makes the potential intelligibles become actual intelligibles. But the thing which is intelligible in itself is also an intellect in itself. For the thing which is intelligible in itself is the form abstracted from matter, and especially if it is abstract in itself and not through another. And this thing [the AI] is also the actual intellect, because if this thing is eternally intelligible in itself in actuality, it is also an actual intellect. 91

The AI is purely intelligible in itself, as he suggests, because it is wholly immaterial in itself; thus, it is a purely actual intellect. Because it is purely intelligible in itself, the AI can also cause other potentially intelligible things to become actually so. Indeed, based on the intelligibility-to-intellect inference, it can also make potential intelligents become actual intelligents. Just like an actually burning match can cause potentially combustible things to burn. Just like the actually visible sun can cause potentially visible colors to become actually seen. In the case of intellecction, it is a power transfer of intelligibility. In each case, if a thing has a power $F$ in itself/actually, it can cause the activation of power $F$ in another by moving the latter’s proper potentiality for $F$. Also, something partially or imperfectly $F$ can be made more $F$ (like already warm water being brought to a boil).

Avicenna suggests in Text 7 that in the case of intellecction, this is just what the power of abstraction is. 92 He argues: ‘For the thing which is intelligible in itself is the form abstracted from matter (al-ṣūrat al-mujarrada ‘an al-mādā), and especially if it is abstract (mujarrada) in itself and not through another”. There is no distinction in the Arabic mujarrada corresponding to “abstracted” and “abstract”. But the English is not frivolous because Avicenna distinguishes between two kinds of things which are intelligible — A) things abstracted from (‘an) matter (e.g., felicity, horleness, redness), namely any universal essence of a natural form which must be made abstract “through another”, presumably the abstracting power of some intellect, and B) things which just are abstract in themselves, purely immaterial and separate substances like the AI. 93 The use of the same Arabic term is still telling, however, because it suggests that Avicenna thinks the power of abstraction (tajrīd) is just the deliverance from potential abstractness (or, as he says, intelligibility) into actual abstractness (intelligibility) by something else which is itself actually abstract (intelligible) in itself. Hence, the power of abstraction is just the active power of intelligibility. This is obviously compatible with Avicenna’s descriptions of abstraction as “extracting” away the accidents and attachments of matter and thus “abstracting” the essential, universal intention. 94 Abstraction actualizes intelligibility by dematerializing the essence as it exists in sensory images so that it becomes immaterial and intelligible like the intellect itself.

91 Najāt, 193.11–19, Destination, ch. 12, 112.6–10.
92 The following explanation agrees with ideas in D’Ancona, ‘Degrees of Abstraction”, 60 ff.; Black, ‘Mental Existence”, 56, and ‘Concepts’. On my view, however, to affirm that abstraction is a power/form of intelligibility is perfectly fitting with its also being part of the activity of abstracting intelligibles from images. See the next two footnotes.

93 Cf. Definitions, 13, §24. Regarding this ambiguity of mujarrad and other forms of j-r-d, see Goichon, Lexique, 37–41 (esp. 38–40, §89.1 and 2), and Jabre, ‘Le sens de l’abstraction”, esp. 287–288. In Pointers III.7, 241, the entire section is entitled ‘On Abstraction (tajrīd)’, and there Avicenna does not discuss the epistemic activity of abstraction (A) at all, but rather a host of topics connected in this general way of being abstract, i.e., separate from matter (B). Yet Avicenna obviously employs sense (A) throughout his works as well, as abstractionists have rightly emphasized — see esp. Gutas, ‘Empiricism’, Appendix 1, 425–428. Avicenna knowingly uses both of these senses, drawing on both Aristotelian sources (see Jabre and Gutas) and Neo-Platonic sources (see D’Ancona, ‘Degrees of Abstraction”). I agree here with Hasse, ‘Optimism”, 110–111. I want to show below that this combination is not a hapless mismatch; indeed, the two are intimately connected.
94 E.g., Psychology II.2, 61.5–17, Najāt, 170.20–171.9 (Rahman, 40); Psychology V.2, 214.6–8; Demonstration IV.10, 331.5–6. Cf. McGinnis, “Making Abstraction”, 172–173.
This idea bears remarkable similarity to Therese Cory’s insights about Thomas Aquinas’s view of abstraction, as partially based on Avicenna. She describes Aquinas as having an active principle model (APM) of abstraction, wherein an “active principle” is a form that is capable of inducing the same form in other things, or, as she also puts it, “power-borrowing.” Part of the relevant background to Aquinas’s APM model of abstraction is Avicenna’s theory of vision, wherein (precisely as we have seen) the sun, visible in itself, effects visibility in the potentially visible objects.

Indeed, McGinnis has argued convincingly that Avicenna deliberately exploits the similarity between his models of vision and intellection. Avicenna interestingly argues (contra Aristotle) that colors are not always actual in objects, but rather that emanated light (from some body that is luminous in itself) must fall upon a potentially colored object in order to make the colors actual. When emanated light “mixes” (khālāta) with the potential colors in an object, actual color comes about.

This mixture creates another ray (al-shu’ū’a’) or shine (bariqa), reflecting the color/visible form (or, rather, its likeness) to the power of vision, i.e., a second emanation from the visible object to the eyes. Avicenna does not explicitly call the light a power, but that is plainly what it is. He calls both the light of a self-luminous body (daw’) and the light it emanates (nūr) a “cause” (sabab) of color, and that is because they give to the visible objects the power to reflect that light and to cause actual seeing. The light meets Cory’s definition of an active principle, and she, thus, helpfully calls it “the active principle of visibility” or “the sheer form of visibility.” Avicenna even calls light a kind of “part” (juz’) of visible color.

These details of vision are mirrored very closely in the case of intelligibility and intellection, especially in the Najāt Texts 3 and 7. Paramount from my perspective is the fact that the light of the sun and the light of the AI are both emanated powers, which cause something else to have that same power, albeit in a new way. The analogy is not quite perfect, however, and there is a key difference from Aquinas’s notion of abstraction. The sun’s light (power of visibility) gives us the power of vision mediately by first granting the power of light/visibility on the potentially visible objects, which then shine on our power of vision. In some texts (2, 3, and 7), Avicenna seems to describe the AI’s role in this way, as emanating the power of abstraction/intelligibility first onto the potentially intelligible images, which then cause the intelligible forms to be impressed on our intellects. If this were the whole
story, Avicenna’s view of abstraction would be structurally identical to
his model of vision and much closer to Aquinas’s account, with the AI
acting primarily on the objects of cognition.108
But this understanding runs counter to several other texts, and it
would leave Avicenna with a philosophical problem. For Avicenna,
the AI is a separate substance (the last of supra-lunar emanated intelli-
gences); for Aquinas, it is an internal power of the human soul. Hence,
if the AI itself acted first on the images in Avicenna, the separate AI
would be doing the abstracting and the power of abstraction would
not be our own.109 Therefore, although Avicenna wants to maintain a
close analogy with vision, he actually says something different about
the intellectual case in Texts 1, 3, and 4, where the order of what is first
enlightened is reversed: The power is first emanated to our intellects
and only secondarily extended to the potentially intelligible objects. In 1, it
is our intellect (not the images) that makes contact with the light from
the AI. In 4, the AI emanates the power of perception upon the rational
power. And in the beginning and end of Text 3, Avicenna expands the
analogy with vision in order to accommodate this fact about intellect—the AI activates both our souls/potential intellects and the images/
potential intelligibles.110 In Texts 3 and 4, the sun is accordingly made
to directly activate our power of vision (in addition to the potential
colors), which is not something Avicenna includes in his standard ex-
planations of vision.111 As Avicenna consistently argues, the AI must
act on our intellects and bring them into actuality.

109. Gilson, Les sources, 65, thus claims that the work of abstraction is accom-
plished by the AI. This makes even less sense in an emanationist frame.
110. The expanded analogy is also found in Themistius, De Anima Paraphrasis,
98.34–99.3; Arabic, 178.4–179.2; and al-Fārābī, e.g., On Intellect, 26–27, esp.
27.3–7 (translated above in fn. 71). See also Sebti, ‘ Analogie’, 20. In addition to
the expanded analogy, it generally seems clear in these places in Themis-
tius and al-Fārābī that the AI first makes contact with the potential intellect.
Given that Avicenna follows them historically and in holding that the AI is
a single separate substance, it is unsurprising that he agrees with them on
these basic mechanics rather than with Aquinas.
111. Of course, we might assume that light also falls on the eye, but it does not first

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This makes sense in the logic of Text 7, viz., that absolute intel-
ligibility/abstraction is what makes something an intellect. By this
standard, it is not just the essences in material things that need to be
abstracted from matter “through another”. Insofar as our intellects, al-
beit immaterial, are still potential and attached to our embodied state,
they too need to be made more abstract—not in their core being, but
in their activity relative to a body and material things. So they must be
brought into actuality and greater abstraction (from material attach-
ments) through a developmental process, caused by an intellect that is
purely intelligible and actual in itself.112
The AI thus loans its intelligibility first to our intellect. That intel-
ligibility, when received by an embodied intellect and when engaged
with images in the moment of learning, becomes the power of abstrac-
tion (intelligibility) with respect to a certain intelligible—like the sec-
ond emanation or ray that bursts forth from the enlightened colored
objects, now with their own power to shine. The power thus becomes
our own and then certainly extends itself to activate the potentially
intelligible images, where the analogy with vision is more closely
preserved.113

For this reason, Avicenna argues in Text 3 that the emanated pow-
er proceeds to the images, and it is the power (not the AI itself) that
makes them actually intelligible.114 Also, I argued above that the meta-
phor of the AI’s light stands for the emanated power of abstraction.
So although Text 2 might seem to claim that the AI acts directly on
the images (in [A] and [F]), Avicenna clarifies in [A] that this is rather
the “light of the Active Intellect in us (fit-nā), i.e., the power of

come to the eye and then go out from there towards the objects. Since Text 3
is just prior to Text 7, it is reasonable to conclude that 7 (which just mentions
the images) is an abbreviation of the expanded analogy in 3.
112. See Psychology V, 237.16–238.5 and I, 5, esp. 48.19–49.5 and 50.9–12.
113. Again, this also seems consonant with Avicenna’s Physics, where the Giver
of Forms moves a body, ‘producing motion by means of a form [that it gives],
and the form producing motion through itself, without an intermediary’
(IV,15, 516, McGinnis transl., slightly modified).
114. See again fn. 48.
abstraction which the AI has emanated upon us and which is now ours to employ.\textsuperscript{115} Avicenna insists that both the AI and our own intellectual abstraction are necessary, co-efficient causes in this process, but the emanation comes first, and then abstraction. Not only is this a kind of reverse ordering of what occurs first in vision, it is also the exact opposite of emanationism (where abstraction comes first and prepares for emanation).

This is still similar to vision, since both vision and abstraction are properly our powers which we use.\textsuperscript{116} But abstraction is also inherently more active than Avicenna’s intromission theory of vision:

\begin{quote}
The intellective power is of a different character [from the power of sensation] because [the intellective power] itself sometimes acts (tāf'ālu) through itself, abstracting (tujarrādu) the form from matter when it wills, and then it comes together with [the form]. This is why it is said that the power of sensation is passive … but the intellective power is active (fā‘ila).\textsuperscript{117}
\end{quote}

It is as if the sun were only to emanate light on the eye, which then reflects onto the potentially colored objects, and these latter objects shine their image back onto the receiving eye. Another (imperfect) comparison is Avicenna’s description of some animals (like the lion and snake) that have something of light already in their eyes. That light can emanate forth to illuminate the area around such animals and thereby enable night vision.\textsuperscript{118} To an even greater extent, our own intellectual activity is both extramission and intromission, abstracting and receiving.\textsuperscript{119} Since Avicenna consistently argues (including in our key texts above) that it is our intellects or rational souls that perform abstraction and not the AI, he avoids the aforementioned philosophical objection.\textsuperscript{120}

Nevertheless, just as the eye in the altered analogy above still needs the sun (and unlike the eyes of animals with night vision!), we still need the AI to emanate the power of abstraction onto us first in each moment of learning, since our intellects are not yet fully abstract in themselves. From its initial state of pure potentiality (the material intellect), the human intellect has to be brought into actuality with respect to each of the intelligibles that it comes to know. The AI is the already entirely actual intellect that effects this transition in each case of first acquiring an intelligible. This occurs whenever the human being has attained a sufficient number of images and begins to peruse them and focus on them in a theoretical way (see again Texts 2 and 6). This prepares the human intellect to receive the emanated power of abstraction anew in each act of initial concept formation. As in Avicenna’s doctrine of intellectual memory, the power of initial abstraction/intelligibility is not a form that remains, but rather it must be supplied by the AI in the moment of actualizing each specific intelligible. But again, in abstraction, the power of intelligibility is then enacted upon

\textsuperscript{115} Similarly, in 2 [C], it is the abstract light from the AI which then emanates onto the images. The light of the AI “in us” is a power genuinely transferred to us, so we do not need to go so far as Rahman, Prophecy, 32–33 and 35, who argues that the AI itself can come to be in the human soul (at least that of the prophet). For criticisms of the latter and some of its shaky textual basis, see Davidson, Alfarabi, 91–92, fn. 74, and Gutas, AAT, 485 ff. Here we might also glimpse another difference with Themistius insofar as he says the AI itself enters into the soul, and especially if he envisions the AI as primarily doing the abstracting. But while Themistius diverges from Avicenna in his identification (somehow) of the separate AI with us (De Anima Paraphrasis, 100.37–101.1; Arabic, 183,5), this union would likely allow him to claim that we do the abstracting as well.

\textsuperscript{116} McGinnis, “Making Abstraction”, 175, argues that facing the objects (in the vision analogue) matches our intellectual activity of abstraction.

\textsuperscript{117} Compendium, ch. 8, 363.21–364.2. Though Avicenna is clear that this is not without the “help” of the AI, not to mention the lower faculties of the soul (363.8).

\textsuperscript{118} Psychology III.7, 143.8–19.

\textsuperscript{119} See again the quote from Beginning III.5: The intellect “is simultaneously an active creator of the intelligible forms and a receiver of them” (97.18–19).

\textsuperscript{120} In addition to the previous quote from the Compendium, see Psychology V.2, 214.6–8: “The intellective power is that very [substance] which abstracts (qu-jarrādu) the intelligibles from determinate quantity, place, position, [etc].” Other texts include Psychology II.2, 61.8–14, Najāt, 171.1–6 (Rahman, 40); Metaphysics V.1.28, 156 (Anawati, 205); and the other citations above in fn. 31.
the essential content of the images, which is dematerialized and made actually intelligible such that it is then received by the intellect.

V. Conclusion

Emanated abstraction offers a way out of the impasse between erstwhile abstractionists and emanationists. For emanated abstraction subscribes to the real, active, and successful abstraction of intelligibles from sensory images, and it denies that the intelligibles themselves are emanated directly into human minds from the AI in the first instance. At the same time, this interpretation also does justice to all the texts where Avicenna plainly gives the AI a necessary efficient causal role via emanation, even in the first acquisition of those same intelligibles. My view takes Avicenna’s emanation and efficient causal language at face value, rather than relegating it to the stage of intellectual memory alone. Emanated abstraction provides a more detailed analysis of the philosophical mechanics behind what I have argued are no mere metaphors of light.

Finally, if my interpretation is correct, it allows us to see Avicenna’s unique position in the history of epistemology. Avicenna’s emanated abstraction puts him in substantial agreement with al-Fārābī and Themistius, but it greatly develops what appear as mere seeds in the latter two thinkers. Avicenna, as always, operates ingeniously in creative continuity with both the Aristotelian and Neo-Platonic traditions. He does not simply repeat classical understandings of abstraction as found arguably in Aristotle or Alexander of Aphrodisias (since abstraction is an explicitly emanated power from the AI). Nor does his real view of emanation comport well with the various emanationist and illuminationist theories that followed in his wake (e.g., al-Suhrawardi’s, Bonaventure’s, or Henry of Ghent’s), and it escapes much (if not all) of the criticism hoisted upon it from this misunderstanding (e.g., from Averroes and Aquinas). Avicenna’s emanated abstraction puts him in much greater harmony with those latter figures of medieval philosophy, but it stands as a thoroughly independent take on the human intellectual powers and their relationship with a separate Active Intellect, the giver of the power of abstract intellect.122

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122. To briefly note more of the contrasts, for Averroes, abstraction is a power of the separate AI, but he never describes it as “emanated” upon human beings, so it is harder for him to maintain that the human being abstracts (which I have claimed is the case in Avicenna). But Averroes is willing loosely to attribute the power of the AI to human beings since the AI’s activity is instigated by our willing (see, e.g., Long Commentary on De Anima III, c. 18, 439.71–76). Aquinas also thinks abstraction is a power of the AI, but the AI for him is not a separate substance. Ultimately, the human intellectual soul and its powers could only come from a separate substance, but this is God for Aquinas (Summa Theologiae I.118.2). And though he speaks of God as creating the intellectual soul and of the agent intellect as “derived from” God as a single principle (ST I.79.3, ad 3), I know of no place where Aquinas refers to the intellectual soul or its powers as “emanated” by God. Aquinas also thinks the creation of the AI in the human soul by God occurs once for the person in utero. Avicenna, by contrast, argues that the power of abstraction is emanated in each case of learning a new intelligible, when the right disposition and images for that form are in place.

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