religions

MDPI

Article

From Shadows to Light: Albert the Great on the Semiotic Structure of Human Cognition

Mercedes Rubio

Department of Core Curriculum, Universidad Villanueva, 28034 Madrid, Spain; mercedes.rubio@villanueva.edu

Abstract

This article explores Albert the Great's understanding of human cognition as a hierarchical, semiotic structure, made of light. It examines his response to the question "What is good for man?", tracing his shift from a moral–theological to an anthropological and epistemological perspective in dialogue with Aristotelian, Neoplatonic, and Arabic sources. Through close textual analysis of his writings on the soul and intellect, the article reconstructs man's hierarchical constitution and highlights the central role of signs and of the imagery of light and shadows in his understanding of cognition. It argues that, for Albert, each level of apprehension functions as a semiotic link that dynamically leads the human intellect from lower to higher degrees of comprehension, intentionally pointing toward the divine source of all being, understood as light. Albert's conception of signs, intentionality, and intellectual illumination is shown to anticipate and go beyond later semiotic theories. Consequently, the article proposes that he should be regarded as a "proto-semiotic" thinker whose original anthropological synthesis, centered on epistemology and sign-theory, illuminates the intrinsic role of signs in human perfection and clarifies how words and images can express the cognitive relation between created and uncreated being.

Keywords: Albert the Great; anthropology; human cognition; mental being; semiotics; sign; intentionality; light and shadow

1. Introduction

Albert the Great's life-long project was to build a comprehensive anthropology, a complete explanation of the human being, based on identifying what leads man to happiness and to the attainment of his final end. Albert's inquiry was guided by the question "What is good for man?" In his first work, called *De natura boni*, he focused on moral perfection, and thus moral and political virtues stood at the center of his reflection. However, as he progressively received Aristotle's philosophy, especially the *Nicomachean Ethics*, which became available in Latin translation, the *Doctor universalis* left this first text unfinished. He realized that he had been too heavily influenced by the approach of William of Auxerre and Philip the Chancellor, renowned scholars at the University of Paris who had addressed the same question from a theological-moral perspective (Anzulewicz 2011, p. 385).

The unfinished *De natura boni* gave way to a new work, *De bono*, in which Albert integrated Aristotle's approach with Avicenna's and Averroes' Aristotelian commentaries. As he becomes more acquainted with Aristotle's philosophical anthropology, he shifts his focus and begins to examine dianoetic—that is, intellectual—virtues instead. His Neoplatonic sources—especially Augustine, Pseudo-Dionysius, and the *Liber de causis*—are also evident in this text.

Academic Editors: María Jesús Soto-Bruna and Mirela Oliva

Received: 10 January 2026
Revised: 4 February 2026
Accepted: 13 February 2026
Published: 26 February 2026

Albert observes that, when considering "what is good for man," there is a tendency to reify that good, as if it were a concrete object that should be the focus of desires and efforts and would bring happiness to human life. Yet any object is limited, whereas man appears to have a longing for unlimited happiness. Since—according to Aristotle—every being in nature is endowed with powers proportionate to the fulfillment of its vital purposes, it is reasonable to assume that the human being can attain such goodness.

Albert's final answer to the question is that God, as the Creator of all that exists, is the Supreme Good and the foundation of the goodness of all created beings, attracting them as their ultimate end. According to him, goodness is diffusive and communicates being,

> "Like the sun [communicates] light. All things are on it [Supreme Goodness] as on the foundation of their being. This is what all choose and desire, either cognitively or sensitively or by living or just by participating in being." (A.M. *De bono*, pp. 12, 30–37)

This last sentence outlines a universal hierarchy of created beings. In Albert's view, human beings tend toward their good cognitively, animals tend to it sensitively, plants by living, and inanimate entities by merely existing. These modes of existence, hierarchically organized, correspond to diverse ways of attaining perfection according to each one's proper nature. They all form a universal ladder or scale of perfection, with the lesser beings at the bottom and the better at the top. More complex and perfect beings, such as man, integrate the lower perfections of lesser beings. Thus, human beings possess the perfections of the inanimate beings, the vegetative, the sensitive and—proper only to himself—the perfection of intellective cognition.[1] This hierarchical organization of the created universe, as described in Albert's writings, is well known and has been widely researched from a metaphysical perspective. His focus on the intellect as being the superior part of man and the one that defines human beings as such has also caught the attention of researchers and been discussed in recent years. As Alain De Libera (1990) claimed and many scholars agree, the heart of Albert's thought is his theory of knowledge (Alain De Libera 1990, p. 215). In fact, Albert's later writings *On the Soul*, *On the Intellect and the Intelligibile*, and *On the nature and Origin of the Soul* stress the acquisition of intellectual habits as the most properly human activity. For him, understanding the nature of cognition leads to discovering where the human good lies, and understanding how cognition works provides a better grasp of how to reach that end and, with it, true human happiness.

This article argues that Albert's signature hierarchical structure of the universe also permeates human cognition from within, that his understanding of the human intellect is based on an imagery of light and shadows that is more relevant than previously thought, and that the various dimensions of man's intellective constitution integrate and work as a genuinely semiotic framework, with signs being the leading component in the search for man's ultimate good and happiness. An overview of prior literature on Albert's theory of knowledge-centered anthropology is in order before tackling the present claims.

Hasse (1995) studied how the Avicennian doctrine of the four intellects was received and reworked by Latin authors down to Albert. He identified the four intellects as relations to intelligible forms and analyzed the progressive structure of abstraction and cognition, but he did not discuss Albert's theory of signs or the role of the light-shadows duality as a semiotic dynamic in man's cognitive activity, according to the medieval scholar (Hasse 1995, pp. 31–40, 62–76). A year later, Lawrence Dewan published a study on *De unitate intellectus* that focused on the status of intelligible species, the relation between knower and known and the critique of monopsychism, but he did not address *intentio* as sign or the semiotic difference between extra-mental and intentional being (Dewan 1996). Beccarisi (2005) and Coccia (2006) followed the trail of Albert's theory of the intellect, but did not

discuss his account of intentionality as the sign *par excellence* and the strong analogy of light and shadows as the organizing principle of human knowledge either.

Henryk Anzulewicz argued in a series of insightful studies that Albert's entire system is organized by a threefold, circular ontological structure of *exitus*, *perfectio* and *reductio*, inspired by the Dionysian tradition, and that human beings are the single link between God and the world, thereby underlining the articulation between hierarchy, participation and intellectual perfection in Albert's scholarly project (Anzulewicz 2000a, 2000b, 2010). Later on, Norbert Winkler published a study on *De intellectu et intelligibili* that identifies this treatise as a systematic, complete exposition of Albert's epistemology (Winkler 2012). He contextualizes it in the intellectual history of German Dominican thought, and focuses on the ascent of the intellect to contemplative happiness as described in this work. More recent work by Anzulewicz and Klünker on *De unitate intellectus* emphasized Albert's defense of the individuality of the human intellect against Latin Averroism and clarified the anthropological implications of this position (Anzulewicz and Klünker 2022). All these studies contributed decisively to bringing to light Albert's anthropological project as centered around man's intellective core. Yet none of them identify Albert's recurring references to light and shadows as the inner dynamics of human cognition, nor do they attempt a reading of these passages as a sign-based description of man's intellectual activity.

The present article builds on this scholarship and proposes this semiotic reading of Albert's anthropological hierarchy of vegetative, sensitive, rational, and intellective powers, arguing that each cognitive level functions as sign and "shadow" of the upper one. Albert's description of human intellect as image and mirror of the First Cause and his imagery of light and shadows leads to the conclusion that this framework is best interpreted as a dynamic semiotic structure based on light as the diffusive principle of all being, starting from intellective being as the most perfect one. Albert's anthropology moves away from the classical metaphysical approach that focused on the being of the physical universe, upholding instead the centrality and superiority of intellective being. By claiming the human intellect to be the link between the physical universe and God, he offers a worldview in which understanding words and images serves as a cognitive bridge between the human and the divine, uncreated Source of all being.

What follows is an examination of relevant texts that support the stated claims. Section 2 overviews the human intellective constitution according to Albert. This section is divided into two subsections: The first subsection focuses on relevant texts from his Commentary to Aristotle's *De anima* that illustrate the hierarchical nature of man's intellective core. The second subsection explores Albert's depiction of this hierarchy of vital principles integrated into the human cognitive constitution culminating in the highest one, properly called intelligence, as a cascade of shadows. It will do so by drawing on texts from *De anima*, *De homine*, *De intellectu et intelligibili*, and his Commentary to Aristotle's *Ethics.*

Section 3 will be devoted to completing the emerging image of man as intellective light, progressively growing as he advances through signs in the understanding of the physical world and himself and, by increasing his intellective light, getting closer to the source of all light. Section 3.1 will examine the semiotic path from its inception, through four degrees of apprehension up to the last one, which is the one properly intellective, as it obtains the immaterial "sign" and "notice" of the extra-mental reality and lays the foundations of discursive reasoning. Section 3.2, completes the picture of man as made of a hierarchy of intellective light, endowed with possible and active intellect and capable of growing in light through their use.

2. The Cognoscitive Structure of Man

Albert takes the intellect to be the core of the human being. While Aristotle had treated the human intellect within the psychological framework of the *De anima*, Albert considers this treatment insufficient for his own purposes and therefore undertakes to develop a complete treatise on the intellect, *De intellectu et intelligibili*, which he regards as an autonomous discipline within natural philosophy (Cf. Anzulewicz 2023, p. 364). Albert understands man as a work in progress, capable of gradually increasing in perfection (Anzulewicz 2019). This dynamic view applies first and foremost to man's intellectual abilities, and this leads him to examine how intellectual perfection can be achieved. This process is complex because human cognitive activity is manifested at different levels, each of which must be examined separately in order to understand how they work and how they interact.

2.1. The Rational Soul and Its Vital Functions Through the Body

The soul's operations are the first insight into the way human cognition works, bottom-up. Albert defines the rational soul as a type of act, but not like the one found in physical bodies such as minerals and other inanimate entities. The latter merely informs the body, an act that is properly called "natura". The soul as a kind of act is more sophisticated because, in addition to informing the body, is the body's source of life and activity. It is an incorporeal power that moves and perfects the body. It is imprinted in the whole of the natural entity but goes beyond it, "as the order of nature is above the nature of each corporeal form."

Albert also defines the soul as "the first act of the organic physical body," something that man has in common with other living beings, such as animals and plants. This act is the being (*esse*) of the body understood as "the diffusion of the form into the matter that it informs." In addition, the soul empowers the multiple operations proper to life, "each one of which is proper to it and essential." By operating these essential actions–that is, the functions proper to living beings–in the body that it habitually powers, the soul is the principle of an organic body. The soul shapes each organ according to its specialized role and locates the organs in different parts of the whole. It operates in the body and in relation to it because these operations cannot be carried out without bodily instruments. By asserting that the soul habitually powers the body, Albert points to the soul as a unique kind of habit. He understands this habit as the fundamental principle of the powers that belong to human natural life, that is, to life in connection with the body (A.M. *De anima*, pp. 67–68).

Albert qualifies this act as a peculiar one because it is the principle of man's essential operations. The soul requires the body in order to fulfil its purpose, informs it, and empowers it in a differentiated way. Hence the multiplicity of faculties operating at various levels—from the most physical to the most incorporeal (vegetative, sensitive, rational)—each one benefiting from and serving the others. The soul is thus a vital principle, an intrinsic cause of order and movement.

Albert illustrates the way the soul operates the body with the act of sight and the visual power. The soul's power performs the vital act of seeing in accordance with the proper nature and complexion of the eye. Sight is the "formal substance" of the eye, giving the eye its *ratio* and its very name. The eye itself, called the pupil or the organ of the eye, is the matter of sight. When the eye has no sight, as in the case of a statue or a painting, both the eye and the pupil are called such only equivocally. What gives each organ its being and its *ratio*—that is, the notion in the mind and the intention of its name—is the soul as principle of its powers. This principle is only intermittently in act, however. Both sight as the act of seeing and sight as the habitual power of the organ—that is, having sight

without actually using it—are also what we call the soul. If the soul is the first act of the body, the acts of the various organs are secondary acts, while the body is only the matter of the organ. Even if Albert closely associates the soul with its powers and their acts, he still distinguishes between them, thereby departing from St. Augustine, who identified the soul with its powers, and anticipating the position of his disciple Thomas Aquinas.

The simpler vital acts, which are the vegetative, are at the service of the more developed sensitive ones. The sensitive acts, in their turn, find their purpose in serving the more sophisticated and the source of these powers, which is properly the rational soul. For Albert, however, the rational soul is not synonymous with the intellect. In his commentary on Aristotle's *De anima*, he raises the question:

> "How the intellect is another kind of soul and separable, and how it is the shadow of the intelligence, while the sensitive soul is the shadow of the rational soul, and the vegetative is the shadow of the sensitive soul". (A.M. *De anima*, p. 76)

This text, which is reminiscent of two similar passages in Albert's *De homine* (A.M. *De homine*, p. 54, ll. 51–57; and p. 570, ll. 36–38) reveals his perception of man as a hierarchical whole, in which the higher levels define what man is, while the lower ones are at the service of man as such.[2] Each member of the hierarchy, starting from the highest, casts its "shadow," which is the member immediately below. The intellect—namely, man's immaterial rational soul—is said to be the shadow of man's intelligence. This intelligence is therefore superior to man's rational activity and seems to be equivalent to Aristotle's agent intellect.[3] The sensitive faculties, including the external and the internal senses—imagination, memory and the cogitative power—are a body-dependent shadow of the immaterial rational soul. And the vegetative principle of life is the even more body-dependent shadow of the sensitive soul, located at the bottom of the ladder. The next subsection is devoted to exploring more in depth this portrayal of the hierarchy of man's intellective constitution as being a cascade of shadows.

2.2. The Intellect and the Interplay of Light and Shadows

The recurring image of the shadow, which draws on Albert's studies of physics and optics, reflects his determination to find ways of describing a complex, immaterial reality that eludes ordinary language.[4] Physical bodies cast shadows when they stand in the way of rays of light. The shadow is a physical *sign* of the body, indicating its presence. But it is also indirectly indicating the presence of light. A shadow is an absence of light in certain spaces because its rays encounter a physical body that blocks them; without light, there are no shadows. By analogy, the hierarchy of the perfection proper to man that Albert describes is made of light, starting from the uppermost intellective perfection. This source of light, which is the highest and the closest image of divine perfection, illuminates everything below it.

Albert's imagery of light and shadow resonates with a broader Platonic and Neoplatonic tradition in which illumination, gradation of being, and descent from a supreme source structure both ontology and epistemology. Without turning Albert into a Platonist, one can detect clear affinities with Plato's use of light and shadow in the allegory of the cave, as well as with later Neoplatonic accounts of the "great chain of being" (for instance in Plotinus and the Dionysian corpus), where lower levels of reality are construed as attenuated images of higher ones. Albert's hierarchy of vegetative, sensitive, rational, and intellective powers can thus be read as a Christianized adaptation of this graded structure of light, in which cognitive "shadows" mark both limitation and ordered dependence on a higher source.

The rational soul is both a sign and a shadow of the human intelligence because it depends on the body to perform its vital actions, being less perfect than the fully separated

human intelligence.[5] The sensitive soul, in turn, is a sign of the rational soul because it is capable of obtaining the data of the external senses and of preparing it for formal abstraction. It is also a shadow of the rational soul because the senses can only fulfil their purpose through bodily organs, and this points to its physical, perishable nature. Finally, the vegetative soul is a sign of the sensitive one because it keeps the bodily organs alive and active so that the sensitive powers can carry out their pre-cognitive operations. On the other hand, it is only a shadow of the sensitive soul because its light is weaker, lacking the power that enables the external senses to contribute to knowledge through their formal operations, which are a prerequisite for intellectual abstraction.

Albert understands the human being in its most defining character as a play of intellective light and shadows. In his view, man's hierarchical cognitive constitution—being analogous to light encountering a body—permeates man's nature hierarchically, so that the only way the upper members can discover the lower ones is by means of "shadows," that is by certain absences or diminutions of intellective light that indicate a lower degree of perfection. The human intelligence can perceive each aspect of lesser perfection in human nature or in the world as a shadow. The presence of a shadow is an indirect sign of light, that is, of a higher perfection that can be perceived only indirectly.

It is important to note that Albert does not identify the human active intellect with the light of the Holy Spirit or with any divine hypostasis. For him, the agent intellect is a created power belonging to the human intellective structure, even if it is described using language drawn from Aristotelian and Neoplatonic traditions that might have interpreted it otherwise. While Albert integrates Aristotelian and Arabic accounts of the agent intellect into a Christian framework, he carefully distinguishes the finite, created intellectual light operative in human cognition from the uncreated light of the divine intellect and of the Holy Spirit. The tension between Hellenistic philosophical models and Christian doctrine is thus resolved not by collapsing them, but by subordinating the former to a theological account in which all finite intellectual light derives from, and remains dependent on, the triune God.[6]

Cognitive shadows also play as a call for attention, as signs that point further, enticing man's intelligence to look closer, to study deeper in search of more light, thus guiding the inquisitive mind toward the source of intellective light. By "sign" is meant anything that is meaningful to the knower. Some signs are meaningful only to a particular person, others to many, but all of them are identified as calling attention to some aspect of reality perceived as vitally important, as one more piece in the puzzle of our knowledge of ourselves, the world, and our place in it. They are the signposts that enable human beings to search meaningfully—that is in the right direction, which is indicated by increasing light—for what is good to them. This quest alone enables man to grow, acquiring greater perfection in what is most proper to him, thus reaching his final end and limitless happiness.

3. The Semiotic Character of Human Cognition

For Albert, as for Plato and Aristotle, only man among all mortal beings is endowed with intellect. He is also endowed with the vegetative and sensitive souls commonly attributed to plants and brute animals. In addition, man possesses a rational soul, also unique to him, which Albert describes it as lying between the sensitive and intellective levels of his cognitive structure and serving as connective. It is clear to him that the rational soul cannot be the highest part of man, because it depends on the body in order to know both sensitively and rationally. Since these two kinds of knowledge are only intermittently in act—they are sometimes in potency—there must be a higher kind of knowledge that is pure act and sets these lower powers in act as needed. This is properly called intelligence, which is fully separated and most proper to spiritual beings than to

mortal ones. The rational soul is therefore not the upper spiritual part of man but the middle one, functioning as a kind of "hinge" between body and spirit (A.M. *De anima*, p. 82, ll. 74–85). The next subsections follow the hierarchical structure of human intelligence from its lower activity through the senses (Section 3.1) through the rational soul, to its very individual source, the active intellect (Section 3.2), while focusing on Albert's account of the nature proper to each one.

3.1. The Beginnings of Reason

Albert's commentary on *De anima* includes a digression to clarify intellectual abstraction. Apprehending, he says, is obtaining the form of a given reality not according to its being as it exists before being known, but according to its *intentio* and its *species*, under which it appears to the knower through a certain sensitive or intellectual *notitia*. This clarification alone already introduces a properly semiotic approach, according to which the *intentio* and the *species* act as mediating signs of the thing known as a whole. What follows is his account of the beginning stages of discursive reason, a power proper to the rational soul.

Albert distinguishes four degrees of apprehension, of which only the fourth is properly intellective, that is, fully separated from matter. The first degree is the lowest and weakest. It consists of the act of the external senses, by which a certain form of the perceived entity is apprehended but still accompanied by its material characteristics. This apprehension takes place only in the presence of the entity perceived: Man can see something only when the thing seen is present.

The second degree occurs when the form is separated from matter and from material presence, but not from material characteristics or conditions. This is the work of the imaginative power, which retains the sensitive forms together with their material properties, keeping what characterizes the individual entity apprehended. Man can imagine something in the absence of that entity, but what he imagines is still an individual object.

The third degree is attained when, in addition to the sensitive data, we apprehend certain intentions that are not impressed through the senses but cannot be known without the latter, such as our evaluation of the entity in relation to ourselves and to others. This degree, Albert claims, is closest to cognition, and it never occurs without estimation and comparison—for instance, when seeing a lion, one not only sees an individual animal of the *felidae* species but also perceives it as potentially dangerous (A.M. *De anima*, p. 101, ll. 62–90).

The fourth and last degree apprehends the *rerum quiditates* stripped of all material characteristics and of the intentions tied to sensitive data. These are simple and fully separated. This kind of apprehension is, for Albert, the only one proper to the specifically human intellect: it grasps the notions of things according to what is universally understood, and not according to what belongs to this or that individual (A.M. *De anima*, p. 102, ll. 11–22).

It should be noted that Albert is arguing for four degrees of apprehension, understood as progressive separations of form from the matter in which it is found. The external and internal senses truly apprehend aspects of reality, even though they depend on what is most properly material, individual and sensible, and they do so by partially separating form from matter. The objects of the senses remain imbued with physical traits, so that their acts of perception cannot transcend the individual, singular thing. Thus, in Albert's view there is a qualitative jump between the first three degrees and the fourth, which is the first properly intellective act and the only one in which form is abstracted, that is, completely separated from matter.[7]

What Albert explains next is crucial for understanding the role of signs and the nature of intentionality in his theory of knowledge. He writes:

> "It should be noted that the *form* of the thing and the thing's *intention* are different. 'Form' is properly what makes the matter in act and the hylomorphic compound be (*dat esse*) by informing them. 'Intention' is that whereby the thing is meant individually or universally according to the various degrees of abstraction. The latter [that is, the intention] *does not make any thing or any sense be* when it [the intention] is in it [the thing or the sense], nor the intellect when it is in it, *but makes a sign and notice of the thing*. Therefore, the intention is not in the thing like the form, but it is rather the species of the whole notification (*notitia*) of the thing." (A.M. *De anima*, p. 102, ll. 28–37)

Albert claims that mental being is of a completely different kind than the being of extra-mental entities. The former is intentional: Its mode of being is to "make a sign and notice" of the extra-mental thing. The *intentio* does not confer *esse* on the thing but functions as a semiotic species that presents the thing to the knower. Then he goes on:

> "The intention, which is abstracted from the whole and signifies the whole, is predicated of the thing. The intention of redness that is in the eye notifies about the whole thing, just as the intention of the non-present individual thing that is in the imagination does. And this is what Aristotle said (. . .), that the senses are of individual things. He did not say that they are only of the form of something, but of all the particulars, just as the intellect is of the universal, which is not a notification (*notitia*) and species of the part but of the whole; and therefore, it notifies about the whole." (A.M. *De anima*, p. 102, ll. 38–65)

Both the intention of the particular object of the senses and the intention of the universal object of the intellect are whole and comprehensive, and they remain indeterminate precisely in virtue of their wholeness. By being thus comprehensive and indeterminate, the intention calls the knower's attention to look more closely into what has been apprehended. Human cognition, as Albert describes it, can *zoom in and out* of the reality apprehended, and intentionality is the guiding light in this process. The intentional species provides a global, sign-like grasp of the object that can be further articulated into more determinate conceptual contents. In this respect, intentionality is not merely one more element in the process, but the proper semiotic dimension of cognition. Mental being is constituted as sign of extra-mental being, that is as an invitation for further consideration, and this means applying added light that may disperse the shadows noticed.[8]

Albert's account of intentionality within a hierarchical structure of "light" and "shadows" places him alongside the broader medieval debates on intentionality and mental representation, but also gives his position a distinctive anthropological and semiotic profile. Later medieval discussions, as reconstructed in Fabrizio Amerini's survey (Amerini 2010) and in Dominik Perler's work on intentional objects (Perler 2001), tend to center on issues such as the categorization, ontological foundation, and functional mechanisms of intentionality, often framed in terms of inner objects and their relation to extra-mental things. By contrast, Albert's analysis integrates intentionality directly into a hierarchy of powers ordered to human perfection. This is consonant with the wider medieval scene as mapped in Gyula Klima's edited volume (Klima 2009), yet it also underlines Albert's specific way of embedding mental being in a teleological anthropology, which the present article interprets in explicitly semiotic terms.[9]

Where is the source of this light? The following section completes the picture of man's cognitive constitution by examining the upper end, namely the intelligence, which powers and oversees the rational soul.

3.2. From Reason to Intelligence

According to Albert, man is the *nexus* between God and the world, and the intellect is what makes this connection possible. The rational soul, he asserts, is a human perfection as a whole and as an incorporeal essence, holding within itself dominion over sensitive and vegetative life as well as over the activities of intellectual life (A.M. *De intellectu*, p. 517b). It is substantially one, uniting to itself all natural powers (A.M. *De anima*, p. 193, ll. 1–8). Intelligence is separated from matter and unmixed, not communicating directly with the body but only through the soul. The soul in turn communicates with the internal and the external bodily senses, and these communicate with the body through their proper organs (A.M. *De anima*, p. 198, ll. 51–62).

This layered structure—from body to senses, from senses to soul, and from soul to intelligence—recasts Albert's anthropology as a hierarchical network of cognitive mediations in which each level functions as a sign and shadow of the level above it.

Albert describes synderesis as "the part of the intellect conjoined to the habit of the operative [principles]," namely a habit connecting between theoretical and practical principles (A.M. *De anima*, p. 240, ll. 66–74).[10] According to his intellect, man is also twofold, with the upper intellective part tending to God, and man's inquisitive reason, the lower part, uniting him to space and time (A.M. *Ethicorum*, p. 627b). Both intelligence and discursive reason are separated, purely immaterial. While intelligence looks upwards to that which is above man, reason looks downwards to that which is below him. Albert asserts that man is more likely to attain temporal happiness through his intelligence than through discursive reason, due to the former's role in searching for the final end and ultimate happiness (A.M. *De homine*, p. 27, ll. 57–59).

Albert fully adopts Aristotle's theory of the possible and active intellects, vigorously criticizing the various interpretations of the Arabic commentators who, misunderstanding Aristotle's assertion that they are separated, place one or both intellects outside of man. Their intelligibles are universal, with no trace of individuation or particulars. In line with Albert's hierarchical understanding of man, there is a hierarchy between them too, with the active intellect as the superior and the possible intellect as the inferior member. Although Albert does not simply repeat the Platonic distinction between *nous* and *dianoia*, his contrast between fully separated intellective act and discursive, body-dependent rationality echoes the tension between intuitive and discursive modes of thought in the Platonic tradition.

One of Albert's most complete descriptions of the possible and active intellects is found in the chapter of his *De natura et origine animae* "On the nature of the possible and the agent intellects in man, and their relation to the soul" (A.M. *De natura et origine animae*, pp. 14–15). According to this text, the intellect is twofold: First, there is the possible intellect, which is caused by the reception of the light of the active intellect when the latter presents the intellective forms to it. The possible intellect is like a *tabula rasa* and is related to intelligibles "as what is manifest in the medium, and in the eye is related to what is visible." It is connatural to the intelligible forms and is therefore the place of the intelligible species, which the light of the agent intellect actualizes. Second, there is the active intellect, which Albert repeatedly compares to light. The active intellect separates forms from matter and from material conditions by illuminating them, making in act what is intelligible only in potency, just as light makes colors actually visible by shining on them. Its twofold task is to abstract intelligible forms, thereby making them simple and universal, and to illuminate the possible intellect so that they become cognitively present to the knower.

In *De homine*, Albert further develops this twofold description of man as at once dependent on the physical world by nature and belonging to the incorporeal, immortal realm through his intelligence, which is the foundation for man's likeness to God (A.M. *De homine*, p. 18, ll. 10–14). Only intellective activity leads to a truly human life—fulfilled

and perfect—and is the source of genuine happiness.[11] In *De intellectu et intelligibili*, the human intelligence is described as "the first image of the light of the First Cause, which is linked to space and time" (A.M. *De intellectu*, p. 515a). Man is built so as to know, and his connection to space and time requires him to develop science through observation of the physical world and experimentation, a task proper to reason.

Albert attributes to the active intellect the task of abstracting intelligible forms from sense data and making them universal, and of illuminating the possible intellect so that it may know in act (A.M. *De homine*, p. 424, ll. 1–3). The essence of the active intellect is pure act and pure light (A.M. *De homine*, p. 222, ll. 1–5), comparable to the sun (A.M. *De homine*, p. 456, l. 55). This is the intellect that causes all men to desire knowledge by nature, being free because it understands when it so wills (A.M. *De homine*, p. 398, ll. 25–27). He mentions two further intellects, the speculative and the acquired (*adeptus*) intellect.[12] Human beings can attain these only by gradually advancing in human perfection, that is, by acquiring intellectual habits. These habits are more connatural to man as such than moral virtues, because only through intellectual virtues can moral virtues be properly specified and exercised (A.M. *Ethicorum*, p. 393b).

In *De unitate intellectus*, Albert claims that the soul has three areas of *Theoria*: First philosophy, attained by the light of the active intellect; mathematics, acquired by reverting to the imagination; and physics, acquired by reverting to the senses (A.M. *De unitate intellectus*, p. 22, ll. 21–26). The power that directly contemplates the First Cause is in act, and this is precisely what the active intellect does. The light of the active intellect illuminates the first principles of reality, both cognitive and extra-mental. It also illuminates downwards and inwards by activating reason and uncovering mathematical principles, and it activates the external senses through the soul so as to know the physical world.

4. Conclusions

The preceding analysis confirms and develops several insights of recent scholarship on Albert's anthropology and theory of the intellect—his hierarchical conception of human nature, the centrality of intellectual perfection and contemplative happiness, and the close link between ethics and cognition—while challenging the predominantly metaphysical and historical framing of these themes with an invitation to move forward.

The proposed interpretation moves beyond Albert's hierarchical understanding of extra-mental reality, focusing on man's intellect as a hierarchy of light and shadows, and claims that his anthropology is best understood as a semiotic framework in which every level of cognition functions as sign and shadow of a higher perfection. In this way, the study complements existing explorations of Albert as system-thinker with a semiotic reading that has so far remained largely unnoticed. This reading hopes to contribute to shifting the scholarly discussion on Albert's anthropological project, a discussion often tinted with a metaphysical approach, towards a more cognitive-centered ground. If intellective signs are the structural interpretive key to his anthropology, an in-depth reconstruction of his theory of knowledge is required.

Albert the Great is not a semiotician in the modern sense, but he can be described as a protosemiotic thinker. His own intellectual itinerary moves from the initial ethical question "what is good for man?" to the anthropological question "who is man?" and then to the path of signs, which he ultimately locates not only around man but, first and foremost, in man's inmost intellective being. When he probes the human cognitive nature and structure, he finds that it is made of signs, light and shadows, a layout that permeates the human being and also helps to explain why man can turn any physical object into a sign.

Albert is acutely aware that extramental being is really distinct from mental being and that the human cognitive structure is hierarchical, with the lower elements pointing—

as signs—to the one immediately above. Man's intellect illuminates the inner path to understanding by finding meaning in a bottom-up movement that leads intentionally to the source of intellective light: The created intellect and the uncreated one, being the former image and likeness of the latter. In this sense, Albert's synthesis of epistemology and sign-theory, with his account of intentionality and mental being embedded in a hierarchy of intellective light and shadows, supports a redefinition of the human person as an intrinsically "semiotic being," whose perfection and happiness consists in fully actualizing this semiotic potential.

Funding: This research received no external funding.

Institutional Review Board Statement: Not applicable.

Informed Consent Statement: Not applicable.

Data Availability Statement: The original contributions presented in this study are included in the article. Further inquiries can be directed to the corresponding author.

Conflicts of Interest: The author declares no conflicts of interest.

Notes

1 Albert justifies the soul–body union by appealing to man as a microcosmic hierarchy: he gathers in himself all "grades of life" in the soul and all "grades of corporeal matter" in the body, so that, through him, the whole universe is ordered ("referred") back to God. Cf. Alberti Magni *Commentarii in II Sententiarum* p. 41b. All translations and paraphrases of Albert's Latin texts are my own.

2 This hierarchical anthropology has been reconstructed in detail by Anzulewicz and others, but without an explicit semiotic lens or a close analysis of the internal dynamics of the various cognoscitive levels discussed by Albert.

3 The term "intelligence" will be used moving forward to refer to the highest member of man's intellective constitution (unless the English language prevents it). The term "intellect" will be kept for the intelligence's shadow, which is discursive reason, a power of the rational soul.

4 Albert could have borrowed this image from Isaac Israeli. Cf. (Altmann and Stern 2009, p. 41, ll. 45–59, 46 and ff).

5 Albert's use of the term "separated" intellect does not entail the Averroist view that the intellect is a substance entirely independent of the individual human soul and body. The intellect is "separated" insofar as its acts and intelligibles are universal and immaterial, but it remains the "spiritual part of man," rooted in human nature and individuated within the person.

6 Recent research on Thomas Aquinas's *Commentary on Isaiah* has highlighted his use of light and darkness as both epistemic and moral markers, as well as the coexistence of lucidity and obscurity in prophetic and theological knowledge. However, one does not find in this work the kind of overarching semiotic structure that the present study proposes for Albert's anthropology; cf. (Astudillo 2025).

7 At this point, Albert does not seem to be using the term "abstraction" in a technical sense, as the first act of the intellect, but rather as a synonym of the more general term "separation" of form from matter. Cf. p. 101, ll. 25–27: "Secundum autem hos gradus abstractionis sive separationis distinguentur inferius vires apprehensive." However, by distinguishing between the three first and the fourth in that the latter is the only one performed by the intellect this should be the only one technically called abstraction.

8 While Hasse and Winkler examine abstraction and intelligible species in historical and noetic terms, they do not treat the *intentio* as a sign and "species totius notitiae rei," namely as the key to a semiotic account of mental being.

9 Recent research also highlights Albert's philosophical anthropology as a unified treatment of the human being that integrates metaphysics, theology, and natural philosophy, with *De homine* as its most explicitly anthropological text; see (Miteva 2016). However, this study falls short of advancing the specifically semiotic reading defended here—namely, that Albert's hierarchical account of human knowledge and his recurring imagery of light and shadow function as an internal theory of signs in cognition.

10 This conception of the intellect seems to correspond with the Augustinian distinction of "ratio inferior" and "ratio superior," which is analogous to the Aristotelian distinction of *intellectus speculativus* and *intellectus practicus*. This duality is conceived as a unity: "uniuntur in una natura mentis." Cf. Alberti Magni *De quattuor coaequaevis*, p. 704a. Thomas Aquinas follows his master's line of thought, distinguishing in the rational soul between the two intellectual habits at play: Wisdom perfects the upper part, while science perfects the lower part. Thomas describes the habit of synderesis as a *scintilla*, a spark, unifying the whole and coordinating the various dimensions of the complex rational operations.

11 Cf. Anzulewicz (2013), p. 343: "man is endowed by God with reason and intellect (*ratio et intellectus*), so that by recalling sensitive experience he may apprehend and explore, besides the sensitive objects, all that is concealed beneath them and exalted above them, such as the First Cause, the separate intelligences, and hence the soul itself."

[12] An idea borrowed from Avicenna's and Averroes' commentaries on Aristotle's *De anima*. Cf. (Sturlese 2005).

References

Primary Sources

Albertus Magnus, *De intellectu et intelligibili*, in *Parva naturalia*, Alberti Magni Opera Omnia vol. 9. Edited by Augustus Borgnet. Parisiis: L. Vivès, 1890.

Ethicorum Lib. X, Alberti Magni Opera Omnia vol. 7. Edited by Augustus Borgnet (Parisiis: L. Vivès, 1891).

Commentarii in *II Sententiarum*, Alberti Magni Opera Omnia vol. 27. Edited by Augustus Borgnet. Parisiis: L. Vivès, 1894.

Summa de creaturis Pars I: De quattuor coaequaevis, Alberti Magni Opera Omnia vol. 34. Edited by Augustus Borgnet. Parisiis: L. Vivès, 1895.

Liber de natura et origine animae, in Alberti Magni Opera Omnia vol. 12. Edited by Bernhard Geyer et alia. Cologne: Aschendorff, 1955.

De anima, in Alberti Magni Opera Omnia vol. 7-1. Edited by Bernhard Geyer et alia. Cologne: Aschendorff, 1968.

De natura boni, Alberti Magni Opera Omnia vol. 25-1. Edited by Bernhard Geyer et alia. Cologne: Aschendorff, 1974.

De unitate intellectus, in Alberti Magni Opera Omnia, vol. 17-1. Edited by Bernhard Geyer et alia. Münster: Aschendorff, 1975.

De bono, Alberti Magni Opera Omnia vol. 28. Edited by Bernhard Geyer et alia. Cologne: Aschendorff, 1951.

Summa de creaturis Pars II: De homine, in *Alberti Magni Opera Omnia*, vol. 34-2. Edited by Henryk Anzulewicz et alia. Münster: Aschendorff, 2007.

Secondary Sources

Altmann, Alexander, and Samuel M. Stern, eds. 2009. The Book of Definitions. In *Isaac Israeli: A Neoplatonic Philosopher of the Early Tenth Century. His Works Translated with Comments and an Outline of his Philosophy*. Part 1. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, Original published in 1958 by Oxford University Press.

Amerini, Fabrizio. 2010. Later Medieval Perspectives on Intentionality: An Introduction. *Quaestio* 10: 3–19. [CrossRef]

Anzulewicz, Henryk. 2000a. Die Denkstruktur des Albertus Magnus. Ihre Dekodierung und ihre Relevanz für die Begrifflichkeit und Terminologie. In *L'élaboration du Vocabulaire Philosophique au Moyen Âge*. Edited by Jacqueline Hamesse and Carlos Steel. Turnhout: Brepols, pp. 369–96.

Anzulewicz, Henryk. 2000b. Pseudo-Dionysius Areopagita und das Strukturprinzip des Denkens von Albert dem Großen. In *Die Dionysius-Rezeption im Mittelalter*. Internationales Kolloquium in Sofia vom 8. bis 11. April 1999. Edited by Tzotcho Boiadjiev, Georgi Kapriev and Andreas Speer. Turnhout: Brepols, pp. 252–78.

Anzulewicz, Henryk. 2010. Solus homo est nexus Dei et mundi. Albertus Magnus über den Menschen. In *Multifariam: Homenaje a los profesores Anneliese Meis, Antonio Bentué y Sergio Silva*. Suplementos a *Teología y Vida*, Pontificia Universidad Católica de Chile. Santiago de Chile: Pontificia Uiversidad Católica de Chile, pp. 323–32.

Anzulewicz, Henryk. 2011. Alberts Konzept der Bildung durch Wissenschaft. In *Albertus Magnus und der Ursprung der Universitäts Idee. Die Begegnung der Wissenschaftskulturen im 13. Jahrhundert und die Entdeckung des Konzepts der Bildung durch Wissenschaft*. Edited by Von Ludger Honnefelder. Berlin: Berlin University Press, pp. 382–97, 538–48.

Anzulewicz, Henryk. 2013. Anthropology: The Concept of Man in Albert the Great. In *A Companion to Albert the Great*. Brill Companions to the Christian Tradition Vol. 38. Leiden: Brill, pp. 325–46.

Anzulewicz, Henryk. 2019. Zum anthropologischen Verständnis der *Perfectio* bei Albertus Magnus. *Documenti e Studi Sulla Tradizione Filosofica Medievale* 30: 339–69.

Anzulewicz, Henryk. 2023. The Emergence of a Science of Intellect. Albert the Great's *De intellectu et intelligibili*. In *Contextualizing Premodern Philosophy. Explorations of the Greek, Hebrew, Arabic, and Latin Traditions*. Edited by Katja Krause, Luis Xavier Lopez-Farjeat and Nicholas A. Oschman. New York: Routledge, pp. 363–92.

Anzulewicz, Henryk, and Wolf-Ulrich Klünker, eds. 2022. *Albertus Magnus, De unitate intellectus. Über die Einzigkeit des Intellekts*. Stuttgart-Bad Cannstatt: frommann-holzboog Verlag e.K.

Astudillo, Jacob. 2025. Light and Darkness in Divine Revelation: A Constructive Study of Thomas Aquinas's Commentary on the Book of Isaiah. Doctoral dissertation, Umeå Universitet, Department of Historical, Philosophical and Religious Studies, Umeå, Sweden. ISBN 978-91-8070-752-7 (print), 978-91-8070-753-4 (pdf).

Beccarisi, Alessandra. 2005. Statuto della metafisica e teoria dell'intelletto nelle opere di Alberto il Grande. *Quaestio* 5: 391–411. [CrossRef]

Coccia, Emanuele. 2006. Intellectus sive intelligentia. Alberto Magno, Averroè e la noetica degli arabi. *Freiburger Zeitschrift für Philosophie und Theologie* 53: 133–87.

De Libera, Alain. 1990. *Albert le Grand et la Philosophie*. Paris: Vrin.

Dewan, Lawrence. 1996. St. Albert, St. Thomas, and Knowledge. *American Catholic Philosophical Quarterly* 70: 121–35. [CrossRef]

Hasse, Dag Nikolaus. 1995. Das Lehrstück von den vier Intellekten in der Scholastik. Von den arabischen Quellen bis zu Albertus Magnus. *Recherches de Théologie et Philosophie Médiévales* 62: 29–76.

Klima, Gyula, ed. 2009. *Intentionality, Cognition, and Mental Representation in Medieval Philosophy*. New York: Fordham University Press.

Miteva, Evelina. 2016. *Антропологията на Албертъ Велики [The Anthropology of Albert the Great]*. Sofia: University of St. Kliment Ohridski Press.

Perler, Dominik. 2001. What are Intentional Objects? A Controversy among Early Scotists. In *Ancient and Medieval Theories of Intentionality*. Edited by Dominik Perler. Leiden: Brill, pp. 201–16.

Sturlese, Loris. 2005. *Vernunft und Glück. Die Lehre vom "intellectus adeptus" und die mentale Glückseligkeit bei Albert dem Großen*. Lectio Albertina 7. Münster: Aschendorff.

Winkler, Norbert. 2012. Albert der Große—De intellectu et intelligibili. Eine intellekttheoretische Wiederentdeckung aus dem 13. Jahrhundert. *Bochumer Philosophisches Jahrbuch für Antike und Mittelalter* 15: 71–130. [CrossRef]