

Themistius as a Commentator on Aristotle: Understanding and Appreciating his Conception of *Nous Pathētikos* and *Phantasia*

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I

Of Themistius (ca. 317–ca. 385/87), Vanderspoel writes that he “was one of the most important individuals in the fourth century AD. Yet his life and work are poorly understood.”¹ While Vanderspoel principally has in mind Themistius’s career as a politician and orator, his comments could as easily be applied to his work as a philosopher. This study aims to recover an appreciation of Themistius’s original and systematic contribution to solving problems in Aristotle’s account of perception and cognition that vex, even today, his interpreters.

As a teacher at Constantinople, Themistius composed paraphrases of Aristotle’s treatises, which were read and studied from Late Antiquity through the Renaissance.² Arguably, his most significant work is his exegesis of *De Anima* III 4 and 5—its impact can be seen quite clearly in Medieval and Renaissance thought.³ The estimation of recent scholars, however, is that Themistian noetics is lacking in originality and impoverished in insight.⁴

1. J. Vanderspoel, *Themistius and the Imperial Court* vii.

2. For a history of the transmission of Themistius’s texts, see R. Todd, “Themistius.”

3. E. Mahoney, “Themistius and the Agent Intellect in James of Viterbo,” 424, describes Themistius as “one of the most important and influential of the late ancient commentators on Aristotle” owing to the influence that his paraphrase of the *De Anima* had on the Islamic and Christian medieval philosophers. This paper of Mahoney details Themistius’s influence on Thomas Aquinas, James of Viterbo, Siger of Brabant and Henry Bate. See also G. Verbeke, *Themistius*, for Aquinas’ appeal to Themistius’s authority on the plurality of the productive intellect. H. Davidson, *Alfarabi, Avicenna, and Averroes on Intellect*, also illuminates the influence of this paraphrase on the Arabic philosophers and E. Mahoney, “Neoplatonism, the Greek Commentators and Renaissance Aristotelianism,” the impact of Themistian noetics on Renaissance philosophy.

4. More precisely, this is the estimation of O. Hamelin, though it is not markedly different from H. Blumenthal’s. See Hamelin, *La théorie de l’intellect d’après Aristote et ses commentateurs*, 38–39. In a passing remark, Blumenthal comments: “Themistius, who, if not always a profound interpreter of Aristotle, is to some extent free from the Neoplatonic influences which in his day

Because Themistius generally stays close to Aristotle's texts he is regarded as a Peripatetic philosopher despite the traces of Neoplatonic doctrine in his treatises.⁵ But he is criticized for failing to approach the text with an overarching interpretive vision and, thus, for offering an interpretation that is piecemeal and incoherent.⁶ For this reason, his periodic appropriation of Neoplatonic doctrine adds fuel to the fire, since these appropriations are easily regarded as symptomatic of an eclectic and unsystematic approach.

It is easy to see Themistius's treatment of *nous pathêtikos* (passive intellect) as a case in point, since it is widely believed to be an egregious misreading of the text. Themistius's passive intellect appears to be a mortal and corporeal third intellect alongside its immortal and incorporeal counterparts, the potential and productive intellects. This interpretation stands in contrast to the more received view that *De Anima* III 4 and 5 only treat of two intellects: the productive intellect, detailed in III 5, and the potential intellect, described principally in III 4 but referred to as *nous pathêtikos* in the closing lines of III 5.⁷ Furthermore, Themistius is regarded with suspicion, and creates confusion about his views, because he seems to attribute this intellect to both Theophrastus and Plato.

Themistius is not only a commentator on Aristotle; he is also one of our main sources of Theophrastus on the intellect. Hence, it is important to

already dominated Greek philosophy." H. Blumenthal, "Neo-Platonic Interpretations of Aristotle on *Phantasia*," 253. For other criticisms of Themistius, see notes 6 and 8.

5. Blumenthal, Todd, Huby and Finamore, for instance, share the view that Themistius is principally a Peripatetic philosopher. Blumenthal, "Photius on Themistius," offers a persuasive argument for this view, while the others let their views known in passing. Finamore's chapter on Themistius is forthcoming, but see Todd, *Themistius: On Aristotle's on the Soul*, 2, and Huby, "Stages in the Development of Language About Aristotle's *Nous*," 140. Ballériaux and Mahoney represent the opposing view. Ballériaux, in "Thémistius et l'exégèse de la noétique aristotélicienne," argues that Themistius's noetics are deeply influenced by Plotinus. His "Thémistius et le Néoplatonisme" draws the same conclusion but this time on consideration of his *nous pathêtikos*. His argument there will be considered in detail in section three of this essay. See Mahoney, "Themistius and the Agent Intellect in James of Viterbo," 264–66 note 1, for a detailed history of this debate.

6. Concerning Themistius's account of *De Anima* III 4 and 5, Huby writes: "It cannot be said that much of this helps us to understand either Aristotle or *nous*, but it illustrates Themistius's interests and methods. He looks closely at each section as he comes to it, and tries to make sense of it by relating it to other sections on a selective basis. But at each point we have only a partial account, and the parts do not add up to a coherent whole ... He is honestly puzzled, and the steps that he takes away from Aristotle are few and unsystematic." Huby, "Stages in the Development of Language About Aristotle's *Nous*," 142. With only a little hesitation, Todd agrees to this assessment. Todd, *Themistius: On Aristotle's on the Soul*, 6.

7. It should be noted that there are probably many more who treat the references to the productive and potential as two aspects or powers of a single intellect.

understand how he approaches and reads texts. It is my view that care and rigor are reflected in his treatment of *nous pathêtikos*. In this paper, I argue that Themistius postulates a third intellect whose job it is to discern enmattered forms—i.e., sensible particulars—on the reasonable assumption that the productive and potential intellects are responsible solely for our contemplation of un-enmattered forms. As such, the passive intellect is responsible for what Aristotle calls incidental perception and, thereby, plays an important role in nearly all of our affections (*pathê*). It is a mistake, however, to regard Themistius's *nous pathêtikos* as a distinct third intellect that stands alongside its productive and potential counterparts. This intellect, I contend, emerges as part of a larger effort to explain the intellect's relation to the rest of the soul in light of the unique way that humans experience the world.

II

Nous pathêtikos is named only once in the Aristotelian corpus. In the final remarks of *De Anima* III 5, Aristotle writes:

When separated it is alone the very thing it is, and this alone is immortal and eternal. But we do not remember because this is impassive (*apathe*), but the *pathêtikos nous* is perishable (*phthartos*)—and without this it thinks nothing. (430a22–5)

Very little in this passage is clear and unambiguous. What we can say with some assurance is that Aristotle here contrasts *nous pathêtikos* with an intellect (or an aspect thereof) known as the productive intellect. While the productive intellect is said to be immortal, eternal and impassive, the contrasted intellect is described as passive and perishable. Their roles, however, are largely left undefined and it is not clear how we are to understand the final line of this passage. Do we as individuals forget during our lives what the productive intellect thinks? Or do we as a separated intellect forget the content of our lives after death? Is (discursive) thinking for the productive intellect impossible without the passive intellect? Or is it the passive intellect that thinks with the help of the productive intellect?

Aristotle writes that the productive intellect belongs to the human soul as cause (*aition*) or producer (*poiêtikon*, 430a12). This, he claims, follows from the observation that in all of nature something serves as the matter for that kind, another as the cause and producer. “Since in the whole of nature there is something [which is] the matter of each kind and another [which is] the cause and producer ... these distinctions must also obtain in the soul” (430a10–14). Corresponding to the productive intellect as matter to cause is the intellect characterized by its ability to become all things (430a14–15). It is widely held that the intellect that becomes all things is the so-called “potential” intellect described in *De Anima* III 4. There, Aristotle explains

that the intellect knows and thinks by becoming its objects. (429a13–18). (Aristotle uses this same formulation to describe sensory awareness. Seeing, for instance, occurs when the eyes become in some manner colored.) The intellect that becomes its objects is known as the potential intellect because, in order for it to become its objects, it must be its objects potentially (429a15–16). For this reason, Aristotle declares this intellect to have no nature of its own other than potentiality (429a21–22).

The objects of thought—what the intellect becomes when it thinks—are the forms, which, in contrast to Plato, belong to material objects (432a3–6) and, therefore, must be cognized apart from their particularizing conditions. It is widely believed that the productive intellect is the cause of human intellection insofar as it is responsible for rendering the forms of objects intelligible, whether directly or indirectly. The productive intellect might act directly on the potentially intelligible forms (the forms represented by images [*phantasmata*] of sensible particulars) in order to actualize them so that they can, in turn, be received and thought by the potential intellect as universal concepts. Conversely, the productive intellect might act on the potential intellect to render it capable of grasping and contemplating the forms of itself. The potential intellect is held to have no actual form or structure of its own and, thus, to lack the agency and actuality required to cognize forms.

According to Themistius, the productive intellect serves as the cause and source of human intellection by actualizing and perfecting the potential intellect. It perfects it by combining and joining with it so that the two become one. Themistius writes:

[The] productive intellect settles into the whole of the potential intellect, as though the carpenter and the smith did not control their wood and bronze externally but were able to pervade it totally. For this is how the actual intellect too is added to the potential intellect and becomes one with it. For that which is of form and matter is one.⁸ (99,15–18)

By the productive intellect channeling its forms and activity to the potential intellect (100,22), the potential intellect acquires form and structure, which enables it to grasp the objects of thought, “to make transitions, to combine and divide thoughts, and to observe thoughts [from the perspective of] one another” (99,9–10)—i.e., to think discursively.

In Themistius’s view, the productive intellect is at once transcendent and immanent. As a transcendent noetic entity, it remains unaffected when it penetrates and joins with the human soul. Accordingly, it remains one even though it is combined with a plurality of potential intellects. Themistius,

8. With only an occasional minor modification, quotes from Themistius’s paraphrase of the *De Anima* are from Todd, *Themistius: On Aristotle’s on the Soul*.

however, does not identify the productive intellect with Aristotle's prime mover because he takes literally Aristotle's claim that the productive intellect is in the soul (430a13) and holds quite reasonably that Aristotle's most divine intellect cannot belong to the human soul as a part. He argues that if Aristotle conceived the productive intellect to be the prime mover, as Alexander of Aphrodisias thought, he would not have described it as "alone immortal and eternal." Unqualified, this description is false because the heavenly bodies are also immortal and eternal. But if, as Themistius suggests, we understand the description to refer only to the capacities of the human soul, it would be accurate (103,9–19). Indeed, Themistius does not take the productive intellect to belong to the divine heavenly realm. In his view, its place is in the realm of nature (100,31–7).

One might expect Themistius to identify *nous pathêtikos* with the potential intellect, as present day scholars typically do. It is only natural to expect the distinction Aristotle makes at the beginning of III 5 between an intellect that makes and an intellect that becomes to be the same distinction articulated at the end of the chapter between the productive and passive intellects. In addition, Aristotle describes the process by which the intellect becomes its objects as a kind of being affected (*paschein ti*, 429a13–18), making it reasonable for Aristotle to refer to the potential intellect as the passive intellect. Yet Themistius takes *nous pathêtikos* to be a corporeal intellect, "what is combined from soul and body in which there are displays of spirit and appetites" (106,15). Themistius maintains that his interpretation is corroborated by a passage from *De Anima* I 4. The context of this passage is the possibility of the soul's moving or being moved. Aristotle denies that the soul moves. It is not the soul that pities or learns or thinks, but the individual (a composite of body and soul), which does these things in virtue of the soul and the intellect in particular (408b13–15). Specifically, Aristotle writes:

Discursive thinking (*dianoesthai*), loving, and hating are not affections (*pathê*) of that thing [i.e., the intellect], but of that which has it, in virtue of having it. That is why, when this perishes, it neither remembers nor loves; they were activities not of that thing [i.e., the intellect], but of the composite (*tou koinou*), which has perished. (408b25–9)

Themistius takes the *koinon* of the above passage to refer to an intellect that is composite with the body, perishable and responsible for, among other things, loving, hating, thinking and remembering.⁹ It is easy to see why

9. Alexander of Aphrodisias also names a common intellect in his *De Anima*. For Alexander, the common intellect refers to the first level of perfection obtained by the potential intellect—i.e., concept mastery coupled with some layman's knowledge. It is so-called because most human beings acquire this level of perfection and is contrasted with the acquired intellect, which is obtained only by the disciplined and talented few. See 82,1–15.

Themistius reads this passage as a forward-looking allusion to *nous pathêtikos*. Like the passive intellect, the referent of “this” and the subject of “perishes” are involved in thinking and remembering. And, of course, like the passive intellect, it is perishable. Yet Themistius’s reading of this passage is described by one scholar as “perverse,” since it attributes to an intellect the active and passive affections that Aristotle clearly tells us belong to the individual taken as a whole.¹⁰ I shall argue in the sections to come that there is no real tension between Themistius’s reading and the text. In the remainder of this section, I shall preliminarily address the corporeality of this intellect. This, too, seems problematic, since Aristotle nowhere (explicitly) speaks of an intellect that is corporeal or mixed with the body. In general, the intellect is described as a separate, uncompounded entity that enters the soul from without as a complete substance.¹¹

Themistius does not make explicit why he distinguishes between the potential and passive intellects or why he takes the passive intellect to be corporeal, but it is not hard to adduce his reasoning, since his treatment of *nous pathêtikos* is consistent with his understanding of corruptibility and passivity. The first thing to note is that Themistius has no problem attributing passivity to the potential intellect. Indeed, he acknowledges that the potential intellect is in some way affected by the objects of thought (94,5–7). Following Aristotle, Themistius recognizes two kinds of being affected (417b2–16; 56,1–12). In its strict sense, “being affected” applies to alterations in which one thing is lost as its place is taken by another, as when the sun changes the color of one’s skin from beige to red. This type of alteration involves a loss (i.e., the extinction of beige) and, therefore, is a change to some privation. As Themistius rightly notes, this kind of being affected does not apply to capacities of the soul since they do not suffer any loss. The soul’s activities preserve their capacities, because passage into activity is a perfection of an inherent nature (417b16; 56,12). In Aristotle’s view, a person might lose some power to reason in old age because her body decays, not because her intellect declines. And the same, he tells us, is true regarding the sense capacities. If an old man were to receive a new eye, his former capacity for sight would return because the Aristotelian soul is impassive: it does not move, alter or decay.¹²

10. Todd makes this comment in the notes to his first translation. He writes: “This supplement highlights Themistius’s perverse interpretation of this text; i.e., instead of accepting the natural meaning of *to koinon* as the compound of the reasoning faculty and the body...he sees it as an intellect exclusively linked with the perishable body.” Todd, *Two Greek Aristotelian Commentators*, 96–97 note 95. Huby reads Themistius similarly. See Huby, “Stages in the Development of Language About Aristotle’s *Nous*,” 141.

11. Compare *De Anima* 408b18–19 and *De Gen. An.* 76b28.

12. It is important to note that within this discussion of the impassivity of the soul Aristotle states that the intellect is imperishable (408b18–19). The intellect is imperishable insofar as all

In Aristotle's view and according to Themistius's paraphrase, the source of an individual's corruption is her body. Therefore, the capacities of the soul are affected in a secondary sense—in the sense of achieving perfection or developing towards one's true nature.

From here it is easy to see why Themistius distinguishes the passive intellect from the potential. Insofar as *nous pathêtikos* is corruptible, it is affected in the strict sense: a sense that cannot be applied to the potential intellect. The intellect of III 4 is unmixed, separate from the body (429a24–5; 429b5) and, thus, imperishable. In fact, on this line of reasoning all the capacities of the soul are imperishable. Themistius, thus, concludes that *nous pathêtikos* is corruptible insofar as it is compounded with the body. The compounded intellect perishes upon the death of the individual, even though its capacities do not.

We have, then, an explanation for why Themistius takes the passive intellect to be corporeal. The question remains as to what Themistius could mean by this, when the intellect, for Aristotle, is not the actualization of any bodily structure. I will address this question in greater detail in the following sections, but for now we can rule out the two most problematic interpretations: the passive intellect is neither a corporeal part of the soul that endures the affections, nor a faculty, like the senses, that has its own organ. Given Themistius's description of the passive intellect as affected and compounded with the body, we might suppose that he conceived it as a corporeal part of the soul that is moved when enduring the affections—that is moved when, say, pitying, loving or thinking. Needless to say, this would be a serious misconstrual of Aristotle's theory of the soul and would put Aristotle in line with Plato. The conception of the soul as moved predominated among Aristotle's predecessors and is the view against which Aristotle constructs his own. But Themistius remains faithful to Aristotle in this regard throughout his exposition. The soul, he reports, neither fears, nor remembers, nor thinks discursively; for these, he writes, “are movements of the whole animal by the agency of the intellect” (27,14). We can, then, rule out the first possibility

the capacities of the soul are imperishable. Themistius thus notes in his paraphrase that there is no need to question whether the intellect is perishable (30,1–2). On the face of it, this appears to be in conflict with his claim that only the productive intellect is eternal and immortal within the soul. But incorruptibility and impassivity are not synonymous with immortality and eternity. The soul can be impassive and immune from corruption and decay, as Aristotle apparently thinks, without being eternal and immortal – namely, capable of existence separate and independent of the composite individual. Accordingly, Themistius does not contradict himself in holding both that the potential intellect is imperishable and that the productive intellect is alone immortal and eternal. Therefore, Themistius's reading of “this alone is immortal and eternal” should not be taken as evidence for the corruptibility of the potential intellect. See Martin, “The Nature of the Human Intellect,” 12, for this argument.

—that Themistius understood the passive intellect to be a corporeal part of the soul that endures the active and passive affections. But the evidence likewise speaks against the second alternative—that the passive intellect has its own organ. The passive intellect appears to actualize most often in accordance with the activity of the heart, the seat of the senses and emotions; however, it is not like the senses in that it does not have a proper organ through which it actualizes. This suggests that, unlike the activity of the senses, its activity is not in any way reducible or identical to some bodily actualization. The activity of the passive intellect must, then, bear a different relation to the body than do the other faculties of the soul.

At this point, the most we can say is that the passive intellect is some kind of rational faculty, which actualizes thanks to the activity of the body, and that Themistius had good reasons for distinguishing between the passive and potential intellects. But it remains to be seen whether he has a comprehensive theory for what this intellect is, what it does and how it fits within Aristotelian noetics. Let us turn, then, to consider its role and function.

III

It has been suggested by O. Ballériaux¹³ and J. Finamore¹⁴ that Themistius's conception of the passive intellect is born out of his Platonic sympathies and his conviction that Aristotle does not significantly diverge from Plato.¹⁵ In particular, they maintain that Themistius's three intellects correspond to Plato's bipartition of the soul in the *Timaeus*. The productive and potential unity is held to be an adaptation of the immortal rational soul, the passive intellect a version of the mortal irrational soul. Indeed, at the end of his discussion on this intellect, Themistius explicitly compares the passive intellect and Plato's mortal irrational soul. The comparison begins as follows:

[Aristotle] describes as perishable the passive [intellect] in respect of which a human being is something combined from soul and body in which there are displays of spirit and appetites. That Plato also takes these [affections] to be perishable is clear from what is said in the *Timaeus*. (106,14–16)

Themistius here remarks that Aristotle, like Plato, regards the affections as perishable. The connection between the passive intellect and the mortal soul is made explicit only in the following lines, wherein he quotes a passage de-

13. Ballériaux, "Thémistius et le Néoplatonisme."

14. Work is in progress.

15. It should be noted that while Ballériaux and Finamore both stress the Platonic and Neoplatonic elements of Themistius's paraphrase on the intellect, of the two only Ballériaux concludes that Themistius is Neoplatonic in his philosophical orientation. Finamore maintains that Themistius is "a Peripatetic with Platonic leanings."

scribing the mortal soul's nature and construction (106,16–29; 69C5–E4 and 72D4). We learn that, like the passive intellect, the mortal soul is responsible for the human affections and the spirits. But the following questions arise: How far is the comparison to be extended? Is the passive intellect just a version of the mortal soul? Is Themistius's intention here to harmonize Plato and Aristotle? Or does he mean only to highlight some points of agreement and nothing more?

It is instructive to begin with a reference Themistius makes to Zeno's account of the human passions at the end of the passage cited above, as doing so will tell us a little about how Themistius uses citations or references more generally. After explaining that the human affections or emotions are, for Aristotle, combined with reason, Themistius notes: "Zeno and his school were not wrong in taking the emotions to be 'perversions of reason,' i.e. mistaken judgments of reason" (107,17–18). Ballériaux makes much of the fact that Themistius approves of Zeno's account of the affections, because he takes him as ascribing to Aristotle a Stoic account of the emotions. For this reason, he sees this reference to Zeno as yet another instance of Themistius's Neoplatonic impulse towards syncretism, arguing that this particular case issues from Plutarch's practice of borrowing vocabulary and definitions from the Stoics when he saw fit.¹⁶

The problem with Ballériaux's supposition is that Themistius's account of Aristotle on the emotions does not accord with the account he attributes to Zeno. Ballériaux himself points out that Zeno's theory precludes animals from having emotions, while Themistius expressly attributes emotions to them (107,9). Indeed, he even criticizes Themistius for failing to recognize this. Yet Ballériaux leaves unmentioned a more important difference between the two accounts—a difference that Themistius could not have failed to notice. Just prior to referencing Zeno, Themistius reports that because human affections involve some sort of judgment, they can, for Aristotle, be virtuous so long as the accompanying judgment is correct (107,15–16). But Zeno's account of the emotions as mistaken or perverted judgments denies that emotions can issue from correct judgments and, hence, precludes their being virtuous.

To understand how the reference to Zeno is used, we need only to notice that the issue under consideration is the cognitive nature of emotions and that this is the point of connection between Aristotle and Zeno. Themistius is interested here in explaining how it is that emotions, for Aristotle, are "combined with reason" (107,10–11). According to Aristotle, human emotions can involve correct judgments; for Zeno, they can only be mistaken judgments. We ought not, then, take Themistius's approval of Zeno too seriously, but rather make note of his guarded endorsement—"Zeno and his school," he

16. See Ballériaux, "Thémistius et le Néoplatonisme," 187–88 and 190–97.

writes, “were *not wrong*.” They were not wrong because, in Aristotle’s view, some emotions involve mistaken judgments. We may conclude, then, that Themistius used Zeno here to corroborate one particular point, not to clarify Aristotle or suggest that he held the same theory. But can we say the same thing about his comparison of the passive intellect to Plato’s mortal soul?

Let us suppose that Themistius took the passive intellect to be an adaptation of Plato’s mortal soul. Because the mortal soul is irrational, we should also suppose that, for Themistius, the part of the soul described as *pathêtikos* is *nous* in only a tangential sense. Based on this approach, the passive intellect would have to be irrational, though not unreasonably called *nous*. Therefore, our interpretation must make clear why, in Themistius’s view, Aristotle would call this *pathêtikos* part of the soul *nous*.

It is plausible that the passive intellect is identical, not to the whole of the irrational soul, but to *phantasia*, since images are a kind of *pathos* (88,35; 450a1, 26) and *phantasia* a bridge between sensation and intellection. In fact, Themistius does take *phantasia* to be a capacity lying “in a no man’s land” insofar as it is superior to sense-perception but much inferior to discursive reasoning (88,26–27). It would, then, be reasonable for him to describe *phantasia* as *nous*. Furthermore, the identification of the passive intellect to *phantasia* looks promising in light of the shared activities to which both faculties are assigned (both faculties are somehow involved in remembering and discursive reasoning) and the dependence of these two faculties on the body.

If Themistius does take the passive intellect to be *phantasia*, his theory of *nous pathêtikos* would anticipate Philoponus and Stephanus,¹⁷ adding support to Ballériaux’s contention that Themistius’s conception of *nous pathêtikos* is formed under the influence of Neoplatonism. Yet Themistius denies that *phantasia* is an intellect. *Phantasia*, he reports, is not the same as *nous* (89,24–25; 91,20–21) because it has no share of reason (90,25). Moreover, he appears to distinguish *phantasia* from the passive intellect. Upon explaining that *phantasia* does not involve opinion or belief, he writes:

But if there is a [kind of] intellect that can also err, and make false as well as true claims, *phantasia* is not easily distinguished from it, when [such an intellect] is so similar. First, there is precisely what I have mentioned, their [shared] capacity to err; then there is the fact that it is equally in our power to think what we wish and to engage in imagining. So let us inquire into the difference between *phantasia* and the sort of intellect [involved in such thinking] in due course. (91,24–29)

17. See Blumenthal, “*Nous Pathêtikos* in Later Greek Philosophy,” for interpretations of *nous pathêtikos* in later Greek philosophy and especially 203–05. Blumenthal has surprisingly little to say about Themistius’s interpretation. He takes the passive intellect to be an aspect of a single intellect that is able to become the form it thinks.

The intellect here contrasted with *phantasia*—the intellect capable of error—can only be the passive intellect. The passive intellect is associated with the affections, which, as we have seen, can involve mistaken judgment, it is the lowest of the intellectual faculties, and it is the intellect that bears the most resemblance to *phantasia*. Unfortunately, Themistius does not, as promised, explicitly discuss the difference between these two faculties. Nevertheless, we can preliminarily conclude that the passive intellect cannot be understood simply in comparison to the mortal soul and be sure that an investigation into *phantasia* will prove useful for our inquiry.

According to C. Steel and H. Blumenthal *phantasia*, for Themistius, is a passive capacity deriving from the senses.¹⁸ This interpretation stems from the emphasis he places on two passages in particular, which, when taken together, appear to suggest that *phantasia* is parasitic on the senses. Themistius takes as canonical (a) passage 428b10–17 of *De Anima* III 3, wherein Aristotle describes *phantasia* as a motion brought about by and similar in character to sense-perception, and (b) passage 450a29–31 of *De Memoria*, wherein Aristotle says that the motion of sense-perception is like a stamp which produces a picture-like imprint. Themistius, for instance, writes:

[Imagination is that] in respect of which we say that some image (*phantasma*) comes to exist in us as a kind of imprint (*tupos*) and form (*morphē*) of the sense-impression (*aisthēma*) in the soul. (89,29–31)

Imagination is [by definition] an imprint (*tupos*) and trace (*ichnos*). (91,12–17)

[The] trace (*ichnos*) that sense-perception retained in extending out to the external object of perception becomes an object for imagination, just as though the wax received the imprint of the seal through itself, and after receiving the imprint and being enfolded in it had gone on to stamp the same imprint on the air, so that, even though the wax and ring had gone away, the surrounding air had acquired a structure. (92,15–19)

The characterization of *phantasia* and the *phantasmata* in terms of imprints or traces (i.e., weak residual sensation) suggests that Themistius conceived the capacity for images as derivative of and, hence, inferior to the senses. These quotes suggest that *phantasia* is passively affected by the activity of the senses and has no agency of its own. But it would be hasty to draw a conclusion from these passages alone, since certain other characterizations are at odds with this interpretation. Themistius, for example, maintains that *phantasia* is “a capacity superior to sense-perception” (88,27).¹⁹ Additionally,

18. See Steel, “Des commentaires d’Aristote par Thémistius?” 673–74, and Blumenthal, “Photius on Themistius,” 172.

19. At 428b27–30 Aristotle explains that *phantasia* of the proper objects are free from error as long as the sensation of it is active. This suggests that *phantasia* operates both at the time of sense-perception and when it is inactive.

in keeping with Aristotle, he takes its operations to occur simultaneously with sense-perception (92,4–7; 93,1), and elsewhere he describes it as active. “Imagination,” he writes, “is in our power whenever we wish to establish it as a foundation for thought” (88,36). There is, then, an apparent tension between his treatments of *phantasia* as a by-product of sense-perception, on the one hand, but as simultaneous with and superior to it, on the other hand. But Themistius does not view the activity of *phantasia* as a mere by-product of sensation. He explains that in order for *phantasia* to preserve and recognize the trace (*phantasma*) as a representation of some external object, it must be “active towards the object of perception at just the same time as sense-perception” (93,1). The difficulty for Themistius is to explain how the two faculties differ, especially given that the two can be active simultaneously. Themistius’s answer is that while the senses focus on (*apereidetai*) the external sensible object, *phantasia* focuses on the imprint or form received by the senses (92,6–12). He appears, then, to conceive *phantasia* as involving some kind of awareness of the image.

Our interpretation so far recognizes only minor differences between *phantasia* and sense-perception. *Phantasia*, on this account, is still just an image-making faculty with no power for cognitive judgment or interpretation. It is aware of its objects in the very same way as the senses. We might wonder, then, why Themistius insists that *phantasia* is superior to the senses. Moreover, we might wonder whether Themistius has satisfactorily distinguished between the two faculties. Indeed, R. Todd is deeply critical of Themistius (and all the other ancient commentators) for assuming *phantasia* to be an image-making faculty. In his view, such an interpretation cannot adequately explain its operations, especially when it is active simultaneously with sense-perception. “Images,” he notes, “are...an embarrassment until perception has ceased, granted that they cannot be integrated into an analysis of perception itself.”²⁰

Themistius, however, does not always treat *phantasia* as an image-making faculty. When clarifying passage 429b10–22, wherein Aristotle describes the objects of the intellect, Themistius gives *phantasia* the power to recognize sensory data as objects. That is to say, he gives to *phantasia* the power to assign concepts to sensibles perceived. He writes:

If this is indeed the case, then when we discern (*krinōmen*) the form (*morphēn*) in its conjunction with the matter, as, for example, cold and wet with matter (this is when we discern water as a whole, for water is the ratio (*logos*) of these [two] qualities and their combination with the matter), and discern water as a whole, or flesh as a whole, the capacity for sense-perception (or rather, its partner *phantasia*) is adequate for us. (96,8–13)

20. Todd, “Themistius and the Traditional Interpretation of Aristotle’s Theory of *Phantasia*,” 52.

Themistius here explains that when we discern water as a whole we sense the proper sensibles—wet and cold—and grasp the form (*morphê*) or *logos* of these qualities inhering in matter. Wet and cold are among the proper objects of touch; they are *per se* objects of sense-perception. Grasping the *morphê* or *logos* such that we thereby grasp what kind of object it is would seem to require a faculty that takes us beyond the capacity of the senses. Indeed, that is why Aristotle calls this discernment “incidental perception”: perceiving that the wet and cold before me is water is incidental to the operation of the senses. However, it is implied here that imagination does just that: it discerns the sensible forms in conjunction with the *morphê* and *logos* of matter.

C. Kahn criticized Themistius in particular, but the ancient commentators more generally, for giving to the sense-faculties the power to discern objects while failing to notice that in and of themselves they are capable of discerning only sensible forms like wet and cold.²¹ As Kahn notes, this kind of discernment requires the use of concepts and, hence, the intellect. Themistius did not, however, fail to notice that object recognition involves *nous*. Just after making *phantasia* responsible for this task, Themistius explains that the intellect also plays a role:

But when we examine what it is to be water and what it is to be flesh, what does the discerning is quite different, or [the same thing] in a different state. For perhaps just as there has to be a single capacity to discern that sweet [taste] is distinct from gold [color], so correspondingly must this capacity that discerns that water and what it is to be water are distinct also be single, and it must perceive them both, yet in two different states when it inspects the matter along with the form, and when it extracts and separates the form. This is because in relation to water it needs *phantasia* to report [to it from sense-perception], but in relation to what it is to be water it is self-sufficient. (96,13–21)

This passage directly follows the conclusion made at 96,13 that *phantasia* discerns water as a whole and the interest of this passage is the same: it is the question of what discerns the compound objects—the enmattered forms. We can assume, then, that the above passage serves to clarify the preceding conclusion that *phantasia* discerns the compound object, though here he concludes that the intellect is responsible for this task.

Themistius’s reason for thinking that the intellect discerns the compound object recalls an earlier discussion in *De Anima* III 2, wherein Aristotle argued that the senses must be united in order for them to recognize that two qualities belong to a single object. Themistius argues that since the intellect is able to discern and judge that water and the form of water (the what it is to be water) are distinct, it must be a single faculty that perceives them both: a single faculty capable of being in different states. This, then, is how

21. Kahn, “Aristotle on Thinking,” 371–72, note 24.

he interprets Aristotle's remark that what apprehends the form or essence is "either separate from the sense-faculty or related to it as a bent line to the same line when straightened" (429b16–17). The intellect, Themistius explains, "becomes like a compound (*sunthetos*) (when it thinks what is compounded), yet at other times like something uncompounded (*haplous*) (when it extracts just the form)" (96,24–26).

The shift we see in 96,8–21 from the claim that *phantasia* discerns the objects as a whole to the claim that the intellect does so as a compound, indicates that *phantasia* operates in conjunction with the intellect when making these kinds of judgments. When discerning water, the intellect, we are told, "needs *phantasia* to report to it" (96,20). It is reasonable to assume that the compounded intellect mentioned at 96,25 is the passive intellect, since it is combined with body and soul, while the potential and productive unity is wholly unmixed and uncompounded (*haplous*) with body (97,25–26). Passage 96,8–21, thus, tells us something about how the passive intellect is combined of body and soul. The passive intellect is so-called neither because it is corporeal nor because it is the actualization of an organ. It is so-called because it is dependent upon the body for its activity. It *needs* the body for its operation (96,20) because its actualization relies upon the activity of the body or *phantasia*. Thus, pace Todd, Themistius has integrated *phantasia* into his analysis of sense-perception and intellection.

It is notable that in the final sentence of our passage, the compounded intellect is contrasted with an intellect described as self-sufficient—an intellect that does not need *phantasia* for its operation because it cognizes matterless form.

[In] relation to water it needs the *phantasia* to report [to it from sense-perception], but in relation to what it is to be water it is self-sufficient (96,19–21).

Presumably, the "self-sufficient" intellect is the potential and productive unity, for the potential intellect, we are told, thinks the forms thanks to the agency it acquires from the productive intellect.²² The above passage, however, suggests that the compounded and self-sufficient intellects are one and the same. I will say more about this in the final section. But let us here note that we are now in a position to understand how the passive intellect is involved in the diverse activities and affections ascribed to it. Insofar as it is responsible for incidental perception, it is involved in our ability to remember, think about

22. Interestingly, what this reading of the productive and potential intellect implies is that they do not depend upon *phantasmata* for the contemplation of form. They might operate in conjunction with *phantasia* in order to make thinking possible for the individual. However, if they are truly self-sufficient, they will not grasp the form via abstraction or the dematerialization of the *phantasma*.

practical matters, acquire knowledge, and think discursively about anything that requires images. Furthermore, it plays a role in the emotions. As Themistius explains, the human affections have two aspects for Aristotle: one that is rational, the other that is bodily. The rational aspect of the emotion is a type of discernment—a judgment such as ‘this situation before me is fearful’ or ‘this situation gives me hope.’ These discernments are accompanied by certain bodily responses. In the case of fear, for instance, it would be the cooling and contraction of the heart (27,8–25). The passive intellect is responsible for the discernment of those concrete particulars.

We may conclude, then, that Themistius’s account of the passive intellect stems neither from a careless misreading of the text nor merely from an impulse to Platonize Aristotle.²³ Themistius’s *nous pathêtikos* answers a need for an account of incidental perception, since the discernment of enmattered objects seems not to be in the purview of either the senses or the intellect. The senses perceive only sensible qualities like white, cold and sweet, but that is a far cry from perceiving objects. Discerning the sensibles as particular objects involves the application of concepts, which requires the intellect. Yet in *De Anima* III 4 and 5, we are told (a) that the objects of the intellect are simply the forms and (b) that thinking is not the actualization of any bodily activity. It is, thus, implied that the intellect does not need or use the body when cognizing its proper objects. The thinking of concrete sensible particulars, by contrast, does require the body. Themistius understood the need to construct an explanation of incidental perception, and developed an original and sophisticated account—an account that explains how *nous pathêtikos*, which as an intellect should be neither passive (strictly speaking) nor perishable, can be both.

IV

The interpretation of the passive intellect that I have been advancing provides a coherent and consistent account of the disparate affections and activities that belong to it. Still, we might wonder whether Themistius posits a whole new noetic entity for this purpose. If the noetic component of the passive intellect were a third entity apart from the potential-productive compound (and thus if the passive intellect were truly distinct from the other two), the difficulty would be to explain how it relates to its more perfect counterparts. The passive intellect is responsible for bringing knowledge to bear on the information received from the senses; hence, if it were a distinct

23. One can see from Vanderspoel’s portrayal that Themistius was interested in promoting harmony in all aspects of life and, therefore, that his interest stems not so much from a Neoplatonic commitment, but rather from a certain political and social outlook. Vanderspoel, *Themistius and the Imperial Court*.

third faculty, Themistius would be hard pressed to explain its function. But the evidence suggests that *nous pathêtikos* is not a third type of noetic entity alongside the productive and potential intellects. Themistius intimates that there is only a single human intellect—the potential, productive unity—and that this intellect is capable of existing in different states. The following passage, for instance, treats the compounded and uncompounded intellect as one and the same:

For the intellect is assimilated to the objects that it thinks, and sometimes becomes like a compound (when it thinks what is compounded), yet at other times like something uncompounded (when it abstracts just the form). (96,24–6)

Furthermore, if the passive intellect were truly distinct, our intellects could not recognize that the form of an object and the compounded object are different (96,13–21). Recall that Themistius argues that the faculty that apprehends concrete particulars must be the same as the faculty that apprehends just the forms, otherwise we would not be able to judge the particular as distinct from its form. We can conclude, then, that the passive intellect cannot be a third noetic entity. It appears, rather, to arise thanks to the form-matter hierarchical structure that determines the relationship between the soul's faculties. Consider the following passage on the essentiality of the intellect for the human being:

What it is to be me comes from the soul, yet from it not in its totality—not, that is, from the capacity for perception, which is matter for imagination, nor again from the potential intellect, which is matter for the productive. What it is to be me therefore comes from the productive intellect alone, since this alone is form in a precise sense, and indeed is a 'form of forms,' and the other [forms] are substrates as well as forms, and nature progressed by using them as forms for less valuable [substrates], and as matter for more valuable [forms]. (100,28–35)

The structure of the soul is described as follows. Sensation is matter for imagination, which is matter for the potential intellect, which is matter for the productive intellect. The productive intellect stands at the top as the 'form of forms' (100,33), since it serves as matter for no higher faculty or entity. Notably absent from this hierarchy is the passive intellect. Only the faculties that are explicitly dealt with in the *De Anima* get a rung on the ladder. We have good reason to suppose, then, that the passive intellect arises thanks to the form-matter relationship of the faculties listed above. The "human intellect" certainly does. It arises from the unity of the potential and productive intellects and its job is to conceive, synthesize and contemplate the intelligible forms. By parallel analysis, the passive intellect ought to arise from the form-matter unity comprised of the potential intellect, or perhaps the

human intellect, and imagination. If this is the intent, then passive intellect is defined by its relation to its particular objects (i.e., the sensible particulars)—which it has thanks to the collaborative efforts of the two faculties involved. And it is important to note that this interpretation is consistent with the way that Themistius speaks of intellects elsewhere. Although he mentions a practical (114,3) and theoretical intellect (102,11; 103,8; 114,4), he certainly does not mean to posit further noetic entities. These intellects, just as the passive intellect, are so-called by reference to their objects and function. The tension, then, between Themistius's reading of 408b25–9 and the text is resolved. Themistius does not take *to koinon* as a third corporeal intellect. Like the rest of us, he reads *to koinon* as describing the cooperative efforts of the intellect and the body.

If this analysis is correct, then our investigation into the passive intellect reveals something interesting about Themistius's approach to the *De Anima*. Notice that the above passage addresses the question of how the intellect relates to the rest of the soul. This relation has troubled interpreters from Theophrastus to the present day. Indeed, it is likely that Themistius gets this worry from Theophrastus, since he is our source for Theophrastus on this issue. However, the framing of the problem has shifted since ancient times. Contemporary scholars are apt to construe the problem as pertaining to the unity of the soul. In *De Anima* II 1, Aristotle defines the soul as the form or first actuality of a body with the potentiality for life (412a19–21; 412b4–6). Although the intellect is treated as a part of the soul, in III 4 and 5 Aristotle makes clear that it is not the actualization of any bodily structure.²⁴

What is intriguing is that neither Themistius nor Theophrastus perceived a conflict between Aristotle's hylomorphic soul and his immaterial intellect: both assume the intellect to belong essentially to the rest of the soul. The question for them is how this is possible, when it enters from without. In the words of Theophrastus, the intellect would seem to be “as if added (*epithetos*)” (107,32). Theophrastus addresses this worry by placing the intellect within the soul at the first generation of the embryo. In this way, it is not “as if added,” since it is connate. Themistius, by contrast, maintains that the intellect dictates the nature and structure of our body and soul. (Matter, in Aristotle's view, is hypothetically necessary for form. Hence the faculty that is the form of forms will influence the faculties that serve as matter.) Thus for Themistius, we are not an intellect housed in an animal's body. We do not have dual natures, as Kahn, for instance, suggests.²⁵ The unity and complexity

24. See Modrak, “The *Nous*-Body Problem” for a clear articulation of the problem.

25. Kahn, “Aristotle on Thinking,” 361, writes that the tension in Aristotle's account between the hylomorphic soul and *nous*, which is not the actualization of any bodily part, is “a systematic attempt to do justice to our split nature as human beings.”

of the human experience, as Themistius understands it, demands an account of the intellect's influence on the rest of the soul. The passive intellect, we can now see, lies at the center of this story.

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