

THEMISTIUS ON ‘PRIME MATTER’, ARISTOTLE, AND THE ‘UNWRITTEN DOCTRINES’ ASCRIBED TO PLATO

ELISA CODA

*Dipartimento di Civiltà e Forme del Sapere
Università di Pisa*

On close inspection, Themistius’ rephrasing of two passages in Physics IV 2, in which Aristotle compares Plato’s *Timaeus* and the ‘unwritten doctrines’, suggests that he was guided in his understanding by a loose association with the account of Plato’s Ideas in the *Metaphysics*. Themistius also interprets Aristotle’s remarks about ‘place’ in *Timaeus* as pointing to the main feature of ‘prime matter’, namely indetermination.

I

Themistius¹ was a prominent figure in education and government in fourth century Constantinople, where he also ran his philosophical school.² He authored both rhetorical works (*Orationes*) and paraphrases of Aristotle’s treatises³ and was even in his lifetime considered a key personality in the philosophical education of the cultured

¹ General presentations of Themistius include, in chronological order: Robert B. Todd, ‘Themistius’, in *Catalogus translationum et commentariorum*, vol. VIII, eds Virginia Brown *et al.* (Washington, D.C.: The Catholic University of America Press, 2003), 57–102; Elisa Coda, ‘Themistius, Arabic’, in *Encyclopedia of Medieval Philosophy*, ed. Henrik Lagerlund, (Dordrecht: Springer, 2011), 1260–66; Jacques Schamp, Robert B. Todd, and John Watt, ‘Thémistios’, in *Dictionnaire des Philosophes Antiques* VI, ed. R. Goulet (Paris: CNRS Éditions, 2016), 850–900; Michael Schramm, ‘Themistios (§ 40)’, in *Grundriss der Geschichte der Philosophie. Die Philosophie der Antike 5/1: Philosophie der Kaiserzeit und der Spätantike*, eds Christoph Riedweg, Christoph Horn, and Dietmar Wyrwa, (Basel: Schwabe, 2018), 410–427, 451–455 (bibliography).

² From about 345 CE, Themistius taught at Nicomedia; later on, at Constantinople: cf., *Or.* 31 and *Or.* 24, 302C–303A.

³ According to some, Themistius also authored commentaries properly speaking: cf., Carlos Steel, ‘Des commentaires d’Aristote par Thémistius?’, *Revue philosophique de Louvain* 71 (1973): 669–80; against this hypothesis, cf., Henry J. Blumenthal, ‘Photius on Themistius (Cod. 74): Did Themistius Write Commentaries on Aristotle?’, *Hermes* 107 (1979): 168–82; John Vanderspoel, ‘The Themistius’ Collection of Commentaries on Plato and Aristotle’, *Phoenix* 43 (1989): 162–4.

segment of the capital.⁴ Themistius set for himself the task of explaining Aristotle,⁵ offering an approach that has been presented as general enough⁶ and ecumenical enough⁷ to avoid the issue of a specific philosophical allegiance.⁸

Themistius was a careful reader not only of Alexander of Aphrodisias⁹ but also of Plotinus.¹⁰ It appears from several idiosyncratic elaborations scattered in his paraphrases that he combines Peripatetic and Neoplatonic readings of Aristotle's doctrines.¹¹ This is one of the most interesting and least studied aspects of his work, and

⁴ There is a general consensus among scholars that the *paideia* advocated by Themistius is the real key to understanding his thought: cf., Glanville Downey, 'Education and Public Problems as Seen by Themistius', *Transactions and Proceedings of the American Philological Association* 86 (1955): 291–307; Bruno Colpi, *Die Paideia des Themistios. Ein Beitrag zur Geschichte der Bildung im vierten Jahrhundert nach Christus* (Frankfurt—Bern: Peter Lang, 1987); John Vanderspoel, *Themistius and the Imperial Court. Oratory, Civic Duty and Paideia from Constantius to Theodosius* (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 1995); Robert J. Penella, 'Plato (and Others) in the Orations of Themistius', in Ryan C. Fowler, ed., *Plato in the Third Sophistic* (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2014), 145–61.

⁵ Them., *In An. Post.*, 1.2–2.4 Wallies; *In De an.*, 1.1–5 Heinze.

⁶ Todd, 'Themistius' quoted above n. 1: 68, recalls that 'Eduard Zeller (1814–1908) placed Themistius in a section on the Neoplatonic school after Iamblichus, with the evasive label of "eclectic". Dispute over Themistius' scholastic affiliation continues, and he defies easy categorization. His Aristotelian paraphrases are too austere to convey strong doctrinal commitments, while his orations inevitably exclude serious philosophical discussion'. According to the same scholar in his *Themistius On Aristotle Physics 1–3* (London: Bristol Classical Press, 2012), 3, 'Themistius was for the first part of his life a semi-professional teacher of philosophy with inherited wealth and a rather high-minded attitude to his calling, and therefore under no obligation to represent any particular viewpoint or to pursue his calling in response to social or institutional pressures. [...] There are indeed traces of Platonism in the paraphrases, notably in linguistic borrowings which include Neoplatonic language in one particular area (his account of the intellect), but [...] he also reproduces Aristotle's criticism of Plato without comment'.

⁷ Richard Sorabji, ed., *Aristotle Re-Interpreted. New Findings on Seven Hundred Years of the Ancient Commentators* (London: Bloomsbury, 2016), 19–20: 'Themistius is more interested in harmonizing Plato and Aristotle than is speaking like a committed member of either school. [...] In other cases Themistius disagreed with Aristotle [...]. He never took the opportunity of making his life under the emperor Julian easier by indicating that he believed in the great power of theurgy up to a point. [...] What Themistius does have in common with the philosophers whom we call Neoplatonists is that he wishes to harmonise Plato and Aristotle wherever possible. But that is not a sufficient condition for being a Neoplatonist: there were harmonisers before Neoplatonism, and Themistius prefers harmony but does not think it is his business to argue for harmony at length'.

⁸ For a balanced assessment of the debate about Themistius' philosophical allegiance cf. Inna Kupreeva, 'Themistius', in *The Cambridge History of Philosophy in Late Antiquity*, ed. Lloyd P. Gerson, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 397–416, at 405–6.

⁹ See my 'Alexander of Aphrodisias in Themistius' Paraphrase of the *De Caelo*', *Studia graeco-arabica* 2 (2012): 355–71.

¹⁰ Themistius echoes the Plotinian doctrines especially in his exegesis of Aristotle's *De Anima*. On some crucial points, such as the doctrine of soul as substance, his exegesis inspired by Plotinus was relevant also for Thomas Aquinas: cf., Elisa Coda, 'The Soul as "Harmony" in Late Antiquity and in the Latin Middle Ages. A Note on Thomas Aquinas as a Reader of Themistius' *In Libros De Anima Paraphrasis*', *Studia graeco-arabica* 7 (2017): 307–30.

¹¹ Cf., Shlomo Pines, 'Some Distinctive Metaphysical Conceptions in Themistius' Commentary on *Book Lambda* and their Place in the History of Philosophy', in *Aristoteles: Werk und Wirkung*, II, ed. Jürgen Wiesner (Berlin—New York: De Gruyter, 1987), 177–204, (repr.: *The Collected Works of Shlomo Pines*, III [Jerusalem—Leiden: The Magnes Press—Brill, 2000], 267–94); Elisa Coda, 'A Revised Aristotelian Theology. Themistius on the Soul of the Heavens and the Movement of the Heavenly Bodies', in *Réceptions de la théologie aristotélicienne. D'Aristote à Michel d'Ephèse*, eds Gweltaz Guyomarc'h, Fabienne Baghdassarian (Leuven: Peeters, 2017), 207–38.

the cross-pollination of different sources in his understanding of Aristotle’s tenets in *Metaphysics*, *De Anima*, *De Caelo*, and also in *Physics* becomes even more interesting considering that, in a paraphrase, the distinction between the doctrines of the main author—in our case, Aristotle—and that of the ‘commentator’ is predictably less evident than in a commentary sentence by sentence, where the authorial sentence and its exegesis are clearly distinct from one another.¹² In Themistius’ paraphrases, the personal elaborations—at times in the form of digressions, but more often as explanatory sentences interspersed in the account of Aristotle’s doctrines—occur within a context of general fidelity to the original wording. This plain and apparently non-committal stance made Themistius’ paraphrases widespread among pagan, Christian, Muslim, and Jewish authors, not to mention the European Humanists.

This paper is devoted to a minor point in Themistius’ exegesis of the *Physics*, but one which in my opinion effectively exemplifies his paraphrastic approach, with its didactical purposes, but also its flaws. In what follows, I will discuss Aristotle’s reference to Plato’s ἄγραφα δόγματα in *Physics* IV 2, 209 b 11–17 as it is understood in Themistius’ paraphrase (pp. 106.18–23 and 107.24–27 Schenkl).¹³

II

Aristotle’s notion of matter, set out as a result of his analysis of becoming (*Phys.* I, 7–9), is also involved in the account of place (*Phys.* IV 1–2). The analysis of ‘place’ opens with a series of *apories* (*Phys.* IV 1) and the criticism of the confused assumptions of those who identify place either with form or with matter (*Phys.* IV 2, 209 b 2–212 a 2). Aristotle also criticizes Plato’s position (209 b 11–17; b 33–210 a 2).

A summary of *Phys.* IV 2, 209 b 1–17 will serve as the background to Aristotle’s account of the Platonic position and of Themistius’ understanding of both Plato and Aristotle. After a first passage where ‘place’ in the broader sense is distinguished from ‘proper place’ (*Phys.* IV 2, 209 a 31–b 1), and the latter is defined as ‘the immediate envelope’ (τὸ πρῶτον περιέχον, 209 b 1–2) of a thing, Aristotle mentions the twin possibility for ‘place’ to be either form or matter. Being a kind of limit (ὁ τόπος [...] πέρας τι ἂν εἴη, 209 b 1–2), ‘place’ bounds each body as well as

¹² Todd, *Themistius On Aristotle Physics 1–3* quoted above n. 3: 2–3, describes Themistius’ ‘creation of a fluent sequence of thought in which the author impersonates Aristotle in order to display interconnections rather than self-consciously and often laboriously explain them [...]’. As a result, Themistius’ ‘use of the first-person singular and plural can be ambiguous, since Themistius does not overtly distinguish himself from the author he is impersonating’.

¹³ At variance with other Themistian paraphrases—most noticeably that of the *De Caelo*—this one is extant in Greek. First published in 1534 in Venice, in modern times it has been edited twice: *Themistii paraphrases Aristotelis librorum quae supersunt*, ed. Leonardus Spengel (Leipzig: Teubner, 1866), vol. I, 105–449; *Themistius In Aristotelis Physica paraphrasis*, ed. Heinrich Schenkl (Berlin: Reimer, 1900), CAG V.2. On the translation into Arabic cf., Coda, ‘Themistius. Arabic’ quoted above n. 1; on the Renaissance translations into Latin, as well as on the Humanist commentaries on this paraphrase, cf. Todd, ‘Themistius’ quoted above n. 1.

the quantity of matter comprised in its magnitude. Taken in this sense, ‘place’ might involve the form and shape of each body (τὸ εἶδος καὶ ἡ μορφή ἐκάστου, 209 b 3). If, on the other hand, one means by ‘place’ the inner dimensionality of the magnitude of a given body (τὸ διάστημα τοῦ μέγεθος, 209 b 6–7), one would rather say that it is matter (ἡ ὕλη, 209 b 7). Even though he does not argue his point here, Aristotle disagrees with both. This becomes clear shortly after, when he claims that it is easy to see why ‘place’ is neither form nor matter (211 b 6–212 a 6)—chiefly because these cannot be separated from the thing lest the thing be annihilated whereas ‘place’ can, as movement proves beyond any doubt. In considering the reasons that may suggest the overlap between ‘place’ and the thing’s inner dimensionality,¹⁴ Aristotle points to the indetermination that characterises matter as the feature that matter shares with place. Both matter and place are bound by limits. Imagine, says Aristotle, a sphere whose limits are taken away: only matter is left. Thus, place and matter have in common that they are determined by their boundaries. It was, Aristotle continues, because of this that Plato identified ‘room’ (χώρα) and ‘matter’:

διὸ καὶ Πλάτων τὴν ὕλην καὶ τὴν χώραν ταὐτό φησιν εἶναι ἐν τῷ Τιμαίῳ· τὸ γὰρ μεταληπτικὸν καὶ τὴν χώραν ἐν καὶ ταὐτόν. ἄλλον δὲ τρόπον ἐκεῖ τε λέγων τὸ μεταληπτικὸν καὶ ἐν τοῖς λεγομένοις ἀγράφοις δόγμασιν, ὅμως τὸν τρόπον καὶ τὴν χώραν τὸ αὐτὸ ἀπεφάνητο. λέγουσι μὲν γὰρ πάντες εἶναί τι τὸν τρόπον, τί δ’ ἐστίν, οὗτος μόνος ἐπεχείρησεν εἰπεῖν.¹⁵

That is why Plato, too, says in the *Timaeus* that matter and space are the same thing (for ‘the participative’ and space are one and the same thing. Though he gave a different use to ‘the participant’ in what are called his ‘unwritten doctrines’ from that in the *Timaeus*, he still declares that place and space were the same thing. While everyone says that place is something, he alone tried to say what it is).¹⁶

¹⁴ Wicksteed’s rendition as ‘room-occupancy’ is clarifying: cf. Aristotle. *The Physics*, with an English Translation by Philip H. Wicksteed and Francis M. Cornford in Two Volumes (London—New York: Heinemann—Putnam’s Sons, 1929), 289.

¹⁵ William D. Ross, *Aristotle’s Physics. A Revised Text with Introduction and Commentary* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1936). Engl. trans. by Edward Hussey (*Aristotle’s Physics, Book III and IV* [Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1983]). David Keyt, ‘Aristotle on Plato’s Receptacle’, *American Journal of Philology* 82 (1961): 291–300, compares this passage with others in the Aristotelian corpus, especially from the *De Gen. corr.*, reaching the conclusion (p. 294) that ‘Aristotle’s interpretation of Plato’s receptacle is thus quite clear. On the one hand, the receptacle is void in the sense of extension or space; on the other, it is matter. Plato in the *Timaeus* does not use ὕλη in the Aristotelian sense nor does he use κενόν in the sense of extension or space. What, then, in the *Timaeus* does Aristotle base this interpretation on? (I am assuming here that his interpretation is not based upon private information.) The identification of the receptacle with matter rests upon Plato’s use of the word “space” (χώρα) an “place” (τόπος) at *Timaeus* 52 (209 b 11–16, 214 a 13–14). The identification of the receptacle with matter rests upon Plato’s use of the gold metaphor at *Timaeus* 50 A–B (*De Gen. corr.* 329 a 14–24).’

¹⁶ Arist. *Phys.* IV 2, 209 b 11–17 (trans. Hussey, 23).

The fact that Aristotle credits Plato with the identification of *ὕλη* and *χώρα*¹⁷ and of these two with both *τόπος* and the *μεταληπτικόν*¹⁸ has attracted much attention in both ancient and modern commentaries. While modern scholars wonder whether Aristotle misrepresented Plato's position and, if so, to what extent and for what purpose, the ancient commentators, in particular the Neoplatonic commentators, try their best to read into this passage some sort of agreement with Plato. In the relevant passage of his commentary on Aristotle's *Physics*, Simplicius offers an interpretation of the relationship between the Forms and the *χώρα* in *Timaeus* that, in his eyes, is apt to counter Aristotle's criticism. Then he lays emphasis on the fact that Aristotle, notwithstanding his disagreement with Plato, praises him as the only one to have provided an account of what 'place' is in reality: a concept, not something corporeal that sense-perception could grasp.¹⁹

In the passage above Aristotle incidentally alludes to a discrepancy between *Timaeus* and the 'unwritten doctrines'²⁰ about the name of Plato's receptive principle. This too has attracted scholarly attention, because shortly afterwards Aristotle provides the key to identifying the name, and by the same token the function, of the receptive principle in the 'unwritten doctrines'. At 209 b 33–210 a 2, he explains why he disagrees with Plato, saying that on the one hand the latter claims that the 'participant' is the 'place' of the Forms, but, on the other, Forms for him are not in

¹⁷ According to Ross, *Aristotle's Physics*, 565, on the basis of *Timaeus* 51 A 4 – B 1 and 52 A 8, B 4 'it is correct to say that the *Timaeus* identifies *χώρα* and the *μεταληπτικόν*'. However, comparing this passage with *Phys.* IV 2, 209 b 33 – 210 a 2, he adds that 'Aristotle evidently assumes that *τὸ μεθεκτικόν* (= *τὸ μεταληπτικόν* of b 14) is in Plato's system receptive of the Forms and numbers, a misunderstanding of *Timaeus* 51 A 4 – B 1'. Luc Brisson, *Le même et l'autre dans la structure ontologique du Timée de Platon. Un commentaire systématique* (Paris: Éditions Klincksieck, 1974, reprint Sankt Augustin: Academia Verlag, 1994), disagrees with Ross: see in particular p. 223 'une telle interprétation, où Aristote voit une contradiction par rapport aux affirmations selon lesquelles Platon dénie toute position spatiale aux formes intelligibles, se fonde sur une fausse identification des formes intelligibles avec les *mimēmata*'. While for Hussey, *Aristotle, Physics Books III and IV* (quoted above, n. 15): 105 Aristotle's report is 'rather careless', according to Keimpe Algra, *Concepts of Space in Greek Thought* (Leiden—New York—Köln: Brill, 1995) (*Philosophia Antiqua*, 95), 110–119, 'More than once Aristotle has been charged with gross ignorance or unfairness in his criticisms of the Platonic receptacle', but the passage under examination here, in Algra's opinion, 'clearly shows that Aristotle did not ascribe a concept of corporeal matter to Plato' (author's emphasis, p. 110).

¹⁸ According to Brisson, *Le même et l'autre*: 221–3 'il est absurde d'identifier *ὕλη* et *χώρα*, comme le fait Aristote [...] en identifiant *χώρα* et *ὕλη*. Aristote décrit le milieu spatial à l'aide d'un terme qui n'est pas platonicien et dont l'usage aurait pu difficilement être suggéré par le texte que nous venons de citer. Par ailleurs, une telle façon de procéder considère le milieu spatial de Platon comme une "matière première manquée"'.
¹⁹ Cf., Simplicius, *In Phys.*, 539–42 Diels.

²⁰ This is the only passage where Aristotle labels these doctrines as *ἄγραφα δόγματα*. The studies on this issue are countless, and here I limit myself to giving (in chronological order) the full bibliographical reference of the studies that will occur in the footnotes below: Léon Robin, *La théorie platonicienne des Idées et des Nombres d'après Aristote, étude historique et critique* (Paris: Félix Alcan, 1908); Konrad Gaiser, *Platons ungeschriebene Lehre. Studien zur systematischen und geschichtlichen Begründung der Wissenschaften in der Platonischen Schule* (Stuttgart: Erns Klett Verlag, 1963) (henceforth: Gaiser); John Niemeyer Findlay, *Plato. The Written and Unwritten Doctrines* (London—New York: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1974); Marie-Dominique Richard, *L'enseignement oral de Platon*, Nouvelle édition revue et augmentée (Paris: Cerf, 2005).

a place.²¹ In this context, he repeats, insisting that this is a little digression from his main point, that Plato's labels for the receptive principle vary:

Πλάτωνι μέντοι λεκτέον, εἰ δεῖ παρεκβάντας εἰπεῖν, διὰ τί οὐκ ἐν τόπῳ τὰ εἶδη καὶ οἱ ἀριθμοί, εἴπερ τὸ μεθεκτικὸν ὁ τόπος, εἴτε τοῦ μεγάλου καὶ τοῦ μικροῦ ὄντος τοῦ μεθεκτικοῦ εἴτε τῆς ὕλης, ὥσπερ ἐν τῷ Τιμαίῳ γέγραφεν.

If a parenthetical remark may be allowed, we should ask Plato why the Forms and numbers are not in place, if place is 'the participative', whether 'the participative' is the great and the small or whether it is the matter, as he writes in the *Timaeus*.²²

Leaving aside the question of whether or not Aristotle's criticism misrepresents Plato's doctrine, lets us focus on the terminological point: while at 209 b 11–17 Aristotle limited himself to saying that, in the 'unwritten doctrines', Plato labelled the receptacle in a different way (ἄλλον ... τρόπον) compared with *Timaeus*, now he goes back to the main point, and specifies this different way. The name of the participative (τὸ μεθεκτικόν in this passage), or the receptacle (τὸ μεταληπτικόν in the aforementioned passage), given by Plato in his 'unwritten doctrines' is the Indefinite Dyad 'large-and-small'. This passage is beyond doubt linked to that quoted above²³ and as such it has been quoted time and again in the inventories of the accounts about the 'unwritten doctrines' by or attributed to Plato. However, it was P. Aubenque who called special attention to this couple of passages in his seminal article on the 'intelligible matter' in Aristotle and its roots in the discussions in the Early Academy. According to Aubenque, the reason why Aristotle saw a connection between the 'place' of *Timaeus* and the Indefinite Dyad of the doctrine of the principles lies in the fact that both are instances of the indetermination that, once determined by the

²¹ The reference is to *Tim.*, 52 A 8 – B 5: see above n. 16.

²² Arist., *Phys.* IV 2, 209 b 33 – 210 a 2 (trans. Hussey, 23).

²³ Note however that Brisson—following the lead of the well-known warning by Harold Cherniss, *Aristotle's Criticism of Plato and the Academy* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1944), who considered Aristotle's accounts about Plato's unwritten doctrines never unbiased—raises doubts about the reliability of Aristotle's account: cf., *Le même et l'autre dans la structure ontologique du Timée de Platon*: 223–4 'Et comment, après tout cela, comprendre ἐν τοῖς λεγομένοις ἀγράφοις δόγμασιν? Trois remarques s'imposent. Premièrement, puisque cette citation est unique, on ne peut affirmer qu'Aristote se réfère "communément" à l'enseignement non-écrit de Platon. Bien plus, on ne peut même pas relier ces ἀγραφα δόγματα aux περὶ φιλοσοφίας λεγόμενα du *De anima*, ou au περὶ τάγαθου dont parle Aristoxène. Deuxièmement, Aristote ne semble pas considérer ces ἀγραφα δόγματα comme la source de la théorie des nombres idéaux; par ailleurs, dans cette perspective, il est très hasardeux d'affirmer que c'est précisément dans ces ἀγραφα δόγματα que Platon interprète le participant comme le grand et le petit τοῦ μεγάλου καὶ τοῦ μικροῦ ὄντος τοῦ μεθεκτικοῦ (*Phys.*, 209 b 13–14). En effet, nous n'avons ici aucune indication sûre nous permettant de soutenir cela. Troisièmement, il est beaucoup plus grave de postuler, dans les ἀγραφα δόγματα, une modification de la doctrine platonicienne du milieu spatial. Aristote ne parle en effet que d'un changement de termes en y affirmant que la nature ontologique du milieu spatial platonicien y demeure identique [...]. On ne voit donc pas comment W.D. Ross peut trouver, dans ce passage de la *Physique*, la preuve d'une modification de la théorie platonicienne en ce qui concerne la nature ontologique du μεθεκτικόν ou du μεταληπτικόν'. Brisson refers for this to pp. 119–21 of Cherniss' *Aristotle's Criticism of Plato and the Academy*.

opposite principle of unity and definition, gives rise to the realities issued from this interaction. As Aubenque has it,

Ce point est largement confirmé par les nombreux témoignages d'Aristote selon lesquels les doctrines non écrites affirmeraient l'existence de deux principes (*archai* ou *stoicheia*): l'Un d'une part, la Dyade indéfinie d'autre part, dont les termes sont souvent présentés comme étant le couple du Grand et du Petit ou de l'Excès et du Défaut.²⁴

The twin passage in *Physics* is thus linked to the account of the doctrine of the principles in *Metaphysics* A and elicits a consistent account on Aristotle's part of the *ἄγραφα δόγματα*. All in all, for Aubenque, Aristotle in *Metaphysics* 'traduit dans son langage la doctrine platonicienne en disant que l'Un agit en tant qu'essence (A 2, 987 b 21–22) ou encore forme (A 6, 988 a 2–3) et que la Dyade indéfinie du Grand et du Petit agit comme matière ou cause matérielle (A 6, 988 a 10)'.²⁵ Following the same course of reasoning, in *Physics* he puts on equal footing the two labels for the principle of indetermination, which, although given other names in *Timaeus* and in the 'unwritten doctrines', performs the same role as the counterpart of the principle of determination. While in *Timaeus*, which deals with the visible world, indetermination is determined by the Forms and the outcome is visible beings, indetermination in the realm of principles is the Indefinite Dyad or 'intelligible matter', and the principle of its determination is the One; the Forms are the outcome of their interplay.

It is along these lines that the Neoplatonic commentators of Aristotle's *Physics* developed their own exegeses, as attested by Simplicius²⁶ and Philoponus.²⁷ They notoriously disagree with one another on many points, but for both of them Aristotle faithfully reports Plato's doctrine of the principles, which implies that, for both of them, Aristotle saw in Plato the interplay of a principle of determination and a receptacle that is determined at work as a general rule for the production of beings—be they intelligible beings or visible ones. It is time, now, to see how Themistius deals with this passage.

²⁴ Pierre Aubenque, 'La matière de l'intelligible. Sur deux allusions méconnues aux doctrines non écrites de Platon', *Revue philosophique de la France et de l'étranger* 172, no. 2 (1982): 307–20, particularly 311–16 and 314. The passage quoted, p. 314.

²⁵ Aubenque, 'La matière de l'intelligible', 314.

²⁶ Simplicius, In *Phys.* IV 2 (209 b 11), 545.9–12 Diels = fr. 54 B Gaiser = fr. 33 Findlay = fr. 7 Richard; cf. William D. Ross, *Aristotelis fragmenta selecta* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1955): 112; In *Phys.* IV 2 (209 b 11), 545.23–25 Diels = lacking in Gaiser's collection = fr. 30 Findlay = fr. 8 Richard; cf. Ross, *ibid.* Cf. also Marwan Rashed, *Alexandre d'Aphrodise, Commentaire perdu à la Physique d'Aristote (Livres IV – VIII). Les scholies byzantines. Édition, traduction et commentaire* (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2011) (*Commentaria in Aristotelem Graeca et Byzantina. Quellen und Studien*, 1): 187–8.

²⁷ Philoponus, In *Phys.* (IV 2, 209 b 3), 521.9–15 Vitelli = fr. 54B Gaiser = fr. 32 Findlay = fr. 5 Richard; cf. Ross, *Aristotelis fragmenta selecta*: 112; In *Phys.* (IV 2, 209 b 13), 515.29–32 Vitelli = fr. 4 Richard, and cf. Ross, *ibid.*: 111.

III

As we have just seen, at 209 b 11–17 Aristotle points to Plato’s different accounts of the ‘participant’ in *Timaeus* and in the ‘unwritten doctrines’ (ἄλλον δὲ τρόπον ἐκεῖ τε λέγων τὸ μεταληπτικὸν καὶ ἐν τοῖς λεγομένοις ἀγράφοις δόγμασιν). This sentence is remarkably transformed by Themistius, notwithstanding the fact that his paraphrase of this passage is *prima facie* a literal quotation, merely made redundant by the repetition of some expressions. In order to highlight this point, the words taken literally from Aristotle are underlined.

In Phys. 106.18–23 Schenkl

Πλάτων τὴν ὕλην καὶ τὴν χώραν ταὐτόν φησιν εἶναι ἐν τῷ Τιμαίῳ· τὸ γὰρ μεταλαμβάνον τῶν εἰδῶν (ὅπερ ὕλη) καὶ τὴν χώραν (ὅπερ ἐστὶν ὁ τόπος) ταὐτὰ λέγει· καίτοι τὴν ὕλην ἄλλως μὲν ἐν Τιμαίῳ φησὶ δέχεσθαι τὰ εἶδη, ἄλλως δὲ ἐν τοῖς ἀγράφοις δόγμασιν· ἐκεῖ μὲν γὰρ κατὰ μέθεξιν, ἐν τοῖς ἀγράφοις δὲ καθ’ ὁμοίωσιν· ἀλλ’ ὅμως, ὅπερ εἶπον, δόξειεν ἂν ταὐτόν ἀποφαίνεσθαι ὕλην καὶ τόπον· λέγουσι μὲν γὰρ ἅπαντες εἶναί τι τὸν τόπον, τί δ’ ἐστὶν μόνος οὗτος ἐπεχείρησεν ἀποδοῦναι· ἀλλ’ ἔοικε μεταφορικῶς κεχρῆσθαι τῷ ὀνόματι· οὐδὲν γὰρ διασαφεῖ περαιτέρω.

Plato actually says in the *Timaeus* that matter and space are identical: i.e., he speaks of the participant in forms (namely matter) and of space (namely place) as identical. Yet in the *Timaeus* and in the unwritten doctrines he says that matter receives the forms in different ways: by participation (*methexis*) in the *Timaeus*, by assimilation (*homoiosis*) in the unwritten works. But still, as I said, he would seem to be claiming that matter and place are identical. For while everyone was saying that place was something, he alone tried to explain what it was. (But he seems to have used the term metaphorically, for he offers no further clarification).²⁸

As I have previously mentioned, at first sight the passage seems to follow closely in Aristotle’s footsteps, but an alarming shift in meaning appears at closer inspection. According to Themistius, Aristotle is pointing here to two ways in which matter for Plato receives the forms: *τὴν ὕλην ἄλλως μὲν ἐν Τιμαίῳ φησὶ δέχεσθαι τὰ εἶδη, ἄλλως δὲ ἐν τοῖς ἀγράφοις δόγμασιν*. However, this is far from being true; as we have just seen, Aristotle is speaking of the different names of the receptacle and by no means of two different ways of reception. This means that a reader of Themistius with no access to Aristotle’s genuine passage would get the impression that Aristotle’s claim is that Plato had two different doctrines about participation, one expressed

²⁸ Themistius. *On Aristotle’s Physics 4* translated by Robert B. Todd (Bristol: Bloomsbury, 2003) (Ancient Commentators on Aristotle), 21. In his note on this passage (78, n. 53), Todd comments as follows on Themistius’ *μεταφορικῶς*: ‘A doxographical report (Aetius I.19.1, at Dox. Gr. 317) of Plato’s theory of place has a similar reference to the metaphorical use of terminology’. In what follows I will suggest a different explanation: see below p. 13 and n. 32. The term *μεταφορικῶς* is also found in Alexander (see Alexander *apud* Simpl., *In Phys.*, 540.22–23, ed. Diels) possible source of Themistius.

in *Timaeus* and another one in the ‘unwritten doctrines’. Themistius goes on to illustrate ‘Aristotle’s’ clause ἄλλως μὲν [...] ἄλλως δέ—in itself a faithful rendition of the genuine ἄλλον δὲ τρόπον—by means of a distinction, totally absent in Aristotle’s passage, between receiving the forms (1) by participation (κατὰ μέθεξιν), and (2) by assimilation (καθ’ ὁμοίωσιν). He specifies, this time following in Aristotle’s footsteps, that way (1) features in *Timaeus* and way (2) features in the ‘unwritten doctrines’. The non-Aristotelian words that crop up in Themistius’ rephrasing lead the reader to believe that ‘Aristotle’ detected two ways for the receptacle to receive the Forms.

Themistius’ passage is included in the various collections of testimonies about Plato’s ἄγραφα δόγματα from Gaiser onwards.²⁹ Truth be told, the passage had attracted attention even before, but Eduard Zeller was sceptical about it and saw in these words a mere conjecture on Themistius’ part.³⁰ On the contrary, according to L. Robin³¹ and K. Gaiser³² the report is genuine and the doctrine here stated can be traced back to Plato, even though it remains unclear what kind of difference one may see between κατὰ μέθεξιν and καθ’ ὁμοίωσιν, because Robin and Gaiser’s accounts do not explain why on earth καθ’ ὁμοίωσιν should point to the ‘stärker formale, logisch-exakte, mathematisierende Darstellungsmethode’ of the ‘esoteric’ doctrines.

No further light is shed by Themistius’ paraphrase of the second item in Aristotle’s comparison between *Timaeus* and the ἄγραφα δόγματα. Indeed, accounting for *Phys.* IV 2, 209 b 33–210 a 2 he does not further elaborate about the two alleged ways of participation:

In Phys., 107.13–16 Schenkl

Πλάτων δὲ εἰ σφόδρα βούλεται τὴν ὕλην ποιεῖν τόπον, ὅρα αὐτὸν καὶ τὰς ιδέας ἐν τόπῳ λέγειν καὶ τοὺς εἰδητικούς ἀριθμούς· καὶ γὰρ τούτοις ὑποτίθησι τὴν

²⁹ Cf. fr. 54B Gaiser = fr. 34 Findlay = fr. 3 Richard.

³⁰ Cherniss, *Aristotle’s Criticism of Plato and the Academy*, quoted above, n. 21, 166–167, n. 95, quotes with approval Eduard Zeller, *Die Philosophie der Griechen in ihrer geschichtlichen Entwicklung*, (Tübingen: Fues, 1856), vol. II 1, 439, n. 2. Following the lead of Zeller’s scepticism, Cherniss remarks that there is no difference between μέθεξις and ὁμοίωσις. Todd, *Themistius. On Aristotle’s Physics 4*, 78, n. 52 follows Cherniss’s opinion: ‘This distinction would seem to be entirely Themistius’ own conjecture; it has no corroboratory evidence in earlier literature. See Cherniss, 166 with n. 95’.

³¹ Léon Robin, *La théorie platonicienne des Idées et des Nombres d’après Aristote*: 423, n. 334: ‘D’autre part, l’assertion de Them., I 259, 22–25 Spgl. [...] que Platon aurait dit dans le *Timée* que la matière reçoit les Idées κατὰ μέθεξιν, et dans ses expositions orales, καθ’ ὁμοίωσιν, ce serait, d’après Zeller II 1, 439, 2 (449), une simple conjecture, soit de Them., soit de quelque autre. Il n’est pas impossible cependant que cette conjecture eût quelque rapport avec la doctrine suivant laquelle le rôle du principe formel est d’égaliser, ou d’assimiler en quelque sorte, les termes inégaux qui constituent le principe matériel’.

³² Gaiser, *Platons ungeschriebene Lehre*, 535, concurs with Robin: ‘Auch die Angabe des Themistius (Nr. 54 B’) Platon habe in der Schule die Verbindung zwischen den Ideen und dem Körperlich-Ausgedehnten speziell als ὁμοίωσις erklärt, weist auf die stärker formale, logisch-exakte, mathematisierende Darstellungsmethode im esoterischen Bereich. Es braucht sich also nicht um eine von Themistius selbst stammende Vermutung zu handeln [...]. Im besonderen ist an die Anwendung der mathematischen Proportionenlehre auf die Ontologie zu denken’.

ὕλην, ὥσπερ ἔφην, ἣν ποτὲ μὲν τὸ μέγα καὶ τὸ μικρόν, ποτὲ δὲ τὸ μεθεκτικὸν ὀνομάζει.

As for Plato, if he really intends to make matter place, then observe that he says that both the forms and the eidetic numbers are in a place. In fact, as I said, he posits matter as underlying these, and this he sometimes names ‘the great and the small’, at other times ‘the participative’.³³

Although interesting from a different point of view—on which more later—this passage does not shed light on the puzzling distinction that Themistius’ ‘Aristotle’ singled out in Plato between receiving the Forms (1) κατὰ μέθεξιν and (2) καθ’ ὁμοίωσιν. The fact that in Plato’s dialogues ὁμοιώσεις and μέθεξις are often used synonymously³⁴ not only does not explain Themistius’ claim, but creates further confusion, because on this count it is even more difficult to explain what the *difference* between way (1) and way (2) might be.

My guess is that Themistius, puzzled by the elliptical sentence of 209 b 11–17, where Aristotle limits himself to an allusive ἄλλον δὲ τρόπον, had recourse to another Aristotelian passage, this time from *Metaphysics*: the famous claim that what the Pythagoreans called μίμησις is labelled μέθεξις by Plato.³⁵ The relationship is only vague because there is obviously no mention of the Pythagoreans in the passage of *Physics*; however, in both places (and for different purposes) Aristotle highlights that a change in terminology does not change the substance of the doctrine. In *Metaphysics* he claims that speaking in terms of μίμησις or of μέθεξις means to make use of metaphors, and in *Physics* he asserts that whatever the name of the recipient principle, the difficulty remains that it is unclear whether or not for Plato the Forms are ‘in’ the recipient principle as if they were in a ‘place’. Be that as it may, the passage of the *Metaphysics* that I believe Themistius had in mind provides a satisfactory explanation for his remark that, according to Aristotle, Plato expresses himself μεταφορικῶς.³⁶

³³ Todd, *Themistius. On Aristotle’s Physics* 4, 22 modified.

³⁴ The most eloquent passage is *Parmenides* 132 D 1–4: τὰ μὲν εἶδη ταῦτα ὥσπερ παραδείγματα ἐστάναι ἐν τῇ φύσει, τὰ δὲ ἄλλα τούτοις εἰκέναι καὶ εἶναι ὁμοιώματα, καὶ ἡ μέθεξις αὐτῇ τοῖς ἄλλοις γίνεσθαι τῶν εἰδῶν οὐκ ἄλλη τις ἢ εἰκασθῆναι αὐτοῖς. See also 133 D 1: ὁμοιώματα, and *Phaedrus* 250 A 6: τι τῶν ἐκεῖ ὁμοίωμα and 250 B 3: ἐν τοῖς τῇδε ὁμοιώμασιν.

³⁵ *Metaphysics* A 6, 987 b 7–14: ‘Things of this other sort, then, he called Ideas, and sensible things, he said, were all named after these, and in virtue of a relation to these; for the many existed by participation in the Ideas that have the same name as they. Only the name “participation” was new (τὴν δὲ μέθεξιν τοῦνομα μόνον μετέβαλεν); for the Pythagoreans say that things exist by “imitation” (μιμήσει) of numbers, and Plato says they exist by participation, changing the name (Πλάτων δὲ μεθέξει, τοῦνομα μεταβαλὼν). But what the participation or the imitation of the Forms could be they left an open question’, trans. Ross, and *Metaphysics* A 9, 991 a 19–22: ‘But, further, all other things cannot come from the Forms in any of the usual senses of “from”. And to say that they are patterns and the other things share in them is to use empty words and poetical metaphors (καὶ μεταφορὰς λέγειν ποιητικάς)’, trans. Ross.

³⁶ See above, n. 25.

Once he had explained the puzzling ἄλλον δὲ τρόπον of 209 b 13–14 in a way that is loosely inspired by *Metaphysics* A 1, 987 b 9–14, Themistius proceeded in his exposition of the rest of Chapter 2 of Book 4 of *Physics*. At 209 b 35–210 a 1, the name of the receptacle in the ‘unwritten doctrines’, namely τὸ μέγα καὶ τὸ μικρόν, did not induce him to go back and correct his interpretation of the previous passage. This means that he was not dissatisfied with his explanation in terms of its distinction between ways (1) and (2), even when he had at his disposal a better solution for accounting for ἄλλον δὲ τρόπον (209 b 13–14). In this sense, I agree with those scholars who saw in Themistius’ rephrasing of 209 b 11–17 a mere conjecture, and in this sense I think that this is a good example of the flaws of the paraphrastic method, which may produce a potentially serious distortion of the authorial tenets, as in this case. However, I am not sure that Themistius’ conjecture is philosophically opaque. If read in connection with his rephrasing of 209 b 33–210 a 2, it may partially shed light on his understanding of ‘prime matter’. What for Aristotle was a polemical remark against Plato—namely the doctrine of a receptacle of the Forms, whatever the name, once stated that the Forms are *not* in a place—becomes in Themistius’ rephrasing the Aristotelian account of Plato’s views about *participation*.³⁷

Aristotle
***Phys.* IV 2, 209**
b 33 -210 a 2

Πλάτωνι μέντοι λεκτέον,
εἰ δεῖ παρεκβάντας εἰπεῖν,
διὰ τί οὐκ ἐν τόπῳ τὰ εἶδη
καὶ οἱ ἀριθμοί, εἴπερ τὸ
μεθεκτικὸν ὁ τόπος, εἴτε
τοῦ μεγάλου καὶ τοῦ μικροῦ
ὄντος τοῦ μεθεκτικοῦ εἴτε τῆς
ὑλης, ὥσπερ ἐν τῷ Τιμαίῳ
γέγραφεν.

Themistius
In Phys.
107.13-16 Schenkl

Πλάτων δὲ εἰ σφόδρα βούλεται
τὴν ὑλὴν ποιεῖν τόπον, ὅρα
αὐτὸν καὶ τὰς ιδέας ἐν τόπῳ
λέγειν καὶ τοὺς εἰδητικούς
ἀριθμούς· καὶ γὰρ τούτοις
ὑποτίθησι τὴν ὑλὴν, ὥσπερ
ἔφην, ἣν ποτὲ μὲν τὸ μέγα καὶ τὸ
μικρόν, ποτὲ δὲ τὸ μεθεκτικὸν
ὀνομάζει.

³⁷ As it has been pointed out by Schenkl’s apparatus ad loc., Themistius’ source is Alexander: see Alexander’s apud Simplicius, *In Phys.*, 546.13–16 Diels: ὁ Ἀλέξανδρος καίτοι συννοήσας, ὅτι εἶδη λέγει τὰς ιδέας νῦν Ἀριστοτέλης, ὅμως ἀναγκάζεσθαι νομίζει τὸν Πλάτωνα ἐν τόπῳ λέγειν τὰς ιδέας, καίτοι ἀύλος αὐτὰς λέγοντα, ἐπειδὴ τόπον καὶ χώραν τῶν ἐνύλων εἰδῶν εἶπε τὴν ὑλὴν.

If a parenthetic remark may be allowed, we should ask Plato why the Forms and numbers are not in place, if place is ‘the participative’, whether ‘the participative’ is the great and the small or whether it is the matter, as he writes in the *Ti-maeus*³⁸

As for Plato, if he really intends to make matter place, then observe that he says that both the forms and the eidetic numbers are in a place. In fact, as I said, he posits matter as underlying these, and this he sometimes names ‘the great and the small’, at other times ‘the capacity for participation’³⁹

The absence of the twin clause *διὰ τί οὐκ – εἴπερ* that forms the backbone of Aristotle’s *criticism* of Plato makes the ‘Aristotle’ rephrased by Themistius simply assert that for Plato both the Forms and the eidetic numbers are *indeed* in a ‘place’. If one is ready to interpret the ‘room’ of *Ti-maeus* as if it were Aristotle’s matter, a principle of indetermination appears both in Plato and in Aristotle as the prerequisite of reality. In Plato, according to this narrative, the receptacle of the determination that is produced by the presence of the Forms produces physical entities in the case of *Ti-maeus*, and another determining principle not named here transforms the indeterminacy of the ‘great and small’ into the eidetic numbers in the case of the ‘unwritten doctrines’. Following Themistius’ account, ‘prime matter’ as the principle of indetermination would be, as a last resort, not so different a concept. This is not meant to say that Themistius deliberately removed the explicit criticism from Aristotle’s sentence of 209 b 33–210 a 2. I am simply suggesting that his rephrasing was guided by the idea of a loose harmony between Aristotle’s conception of matter and ‘Plato’s’ interplay of determination and indetermination that paves the way to the concept of a ‘prime matter’ waiting for boundaries and shape in order to become a body.⁴⁰

³⁸ Trans. Hussey, 23.

³⁹ Trans. Todd, 2.

⁴⁰ For the evolution of the notion of ‘prime matter’ as unqualified substratum possessing only three-dimensionality and suited to receive all forms the reference work is Frans A. J. de Haas, *John Philoponus’ New Definition of Prime Matter. Aspects of its Background in Neoplatonism and the Ancient Commentary Tradition* (Leiden – New York – Köln: Brill, 1997) (*Philosophia Antiqua*, 69). De Haas also lists Themistius among the commentators of Aristotle’s *Physics* who contributed to shaping the idea that ‘the statement that “the extension of the magnitude *ὀρίζεται*” amounts to the statement that the extension of the magnitude (which is apparently in itself indefinite, and which is called matter) is made definite by its limits. In this case “matter and *τὸ ἀόριστον*” may refer straight away to extensionality indefinite as to size’ (p. 58). In the same vein, see also the remark of Keimpe Algra – Johannes van Ophuijsen, *Philoponus: On Aristotle’s Physics 4.1-5*, (London – New Delhi – New York – Sydney: Bloomsbury, 2012) (*Ancient Commentators on Aristotle*), p. 2: “Philoponus often refers to Themistius, he sometimes takes over his readings of Aristotle’s text, and he includes extensive paraphrasing quotations from his work, e.g. in his discussion of Aristotle’s rather obscure arguments against the conception of place as a three-dimensional extension (*in Phys.* 550.9-551.20)”.