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Themistius on Concept Acquisition and Knowledge of Essences

by Myrna Gabbe (Dayton)

Abstract: Themistius's (ca. 317–ca. 388 C.E.) paraphrase of the *De Anima* is an influential and important work; however, it is not now regarded as profound or original and thereby suffers from neglect. I argue that Themistius is misunderstood on the matter of Aristotle's productive and potential intellects. It is commonly held that Themistius gives to the productive intellect the role of illuminating images in order to produce universal thoughts in the potential intellect with epistemic certainty. I argue that Themistius's productive intellect does not transform images to reveal the forms contained therein, but gives to the potential intellect the ability, first, to organize our sense-experiences in the course of acquiring rudimentary universal concepts and, then, to discover the forms of things by ordinary discursive thinking.

I

Themistius (ca. 317–ca. 388 C.E.) was once an influential philosopher. His paraphrases of Aristotle's treatises were studied from Late Antiquity through the Renaissance and translated into Syriac, Arabic, Hebrew and Latin.¹ Arguably, his paraphrase of the *De Anima* is his most important work, as its influence can be seen in the writings of Averroes and Thomas Aquinas.² However, this treatise is not now regarded as profound or illuminating and it, thereby, suffers from neglect.³

¹ Extant are his paraphrases on the *Posterior Analytics*, *Physics*, *De Anima*, *De Caelo* and *Metaphysics* Λ; now lost are his exegeses of the *Categories*, *Prior Analytics* and *Topics*. See Todd 2003 for a complete survey and history of Themistius's work.

² For Themistius's influence on the Christian and Islamic medieval philosophers, see, e.g., Verbeke 1957, Mahoney 1973, Davidson 1992, and Taylor 2007.

³ Hamelin 1953, 38f. writes: "Après Alexandre, la seule interprétation profonde et originale de la théorie de l'intellect [...] c'est l'interprétation des Alexandrins. Or on se tromperait en la cherchant dans Thémistius: on n'en trouverait que des traces. [...] Bien qu'à propos de l'intellect il quitte un moment le genre de la paraphrase pour celui du commentaire, ses développements gardent toujours ce caractère littéral qui fait de lui un interprète utile et sûr pour l'intelligence verbale d'Aristote, mais pauvre en aperçus profonds sur la pensée du maître." Blumenthal 1977, 253 expresses a similar sentiment, noting in passing that Themistius is not a profound interpreter of Aristotle. And Ballériaux 1994 does not think him astute enough to see the obvious contradictions in his supposed theory of the emotions. Indeed, contemporary scholars are

Themistius is in part to blame for the present day reception of this exegesis. He wrote paraphrases, rather than lengthy commentaries, to enable those limited in time to return to a study of Aristotle's works.⁴ But his summary style gives the impression that his understanding of the text is superficial, and this leads the reader to wonder whether he approached it with a systematic interpretive strategy. The view of recent scholars is that he did not. On his methodology, Pamela Huby writes: "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". In her view, "we have only a partial account, and the parts do not add up to a coherent whole".⁵ But even if Huby's description were accurate, Themistius's *De Anima* would still warrant a careful study. It is the earliest surviving commentary on the *De Anima*; it is a significant source for Theophrastus on the intellect; and it influenced the thought of medieval and Renaissance philosophers.⁶ However, I hope to show that her assessment is not correct.

In this essay I argue that Themistius is misunderstood on the matter of Aristotle's productive and potential intellects. It is commonly held that Themistius gives to the productive intellect the role of illuminating images in order to produce universal thoughts with epistemic certainty in its potential counterpart. This problematic theory was once commonly attributed to Aristotle and, though it is not now in favor, is still widely attributed to his Peripatetic successors. I argue that Themistius's productive intellect does not provide insight by transforming images or illuminating forms contained therein. It gives to the potential intellect the ability, first, to organize our sense-experiences in the course of acquiring rudimentary universal concepts, and, then, to discover the forms and essences by ordinary discursive thinking.

II

Aristotle distinguishes between the productive and potential intellects in *De Anima* III 5. Observing that in the whole of nature one thing serves as matter for each kind, something else as cause and producer, he concludes

quick to attribute flatfooted interpretation of Aristotle to Themistius and the ancient Greek commentators more generally. See notes 20 and 24.

⁴ See the proem to Themistius's paraphrase of the *Posterior Analytics* and page 3 of the introduction to Todd's 1996 translation of Themistius's paraphrase of the *De Anima*.

⁵ Huby 1991, 142. Tuominen 2009, 25 makes a similar observation: "Themistius is not striving for unity in his accounts of various issues. Rather, he aims to clarify the point at hand, and such clarifications may contain interpretative trends that pull the resulting whole in different directions". Todd 1996, 4–7, with some hesitation, agrees with this assessment.

⁶ See, e.g., Mahoney 1982.

that these differences likewise belong to the soul (430a10–14): one sort of intellect serves as matter by its capacity to become all things, the other as cause by its power to produce all things (430a14f.). The former is typically held to be the seat of human intellection because in *De Anima* III 4 Aristotle tells us that the intellect thinks and knows by becoming the objects of thought⁷ – the forms or essences of material, mathematical and immaterial substances. The assimilation model of thinking mirrors the causal structure of sensing: both thinking and sensing take place when the faculties become isomorphic with their objects. The intellect that thinks and knows is called the potential intellect ($\deltaυνάμει νοῦς$) because the intellect must be its objects potentially in order to become and know them actually (429a15f.; a27–29). The productive intellect ($ποιητικός νοῦς$), by contrast, is responsible for the intelligibility of the material world.

It is unclear what the productive and potential intellects are – if indeed they are intellects and not simply aspects thereof. Aristotle ascribes to the productive intellect divine characteristics. It is separate (430a17; a22), in its essence activity (430a18), and alone immortal and eternal (430a23). However, he also suggests that it belongs to the human soul (430a13f.). Themistius takes Aristotle as describing a transcendent yet immanent noetic entity, but, unlike Alexander of Aphrodisias, he does not believe it to be the prime mover. Themistius envisions the productive intellect as a kind of soul – as form inhering in matter. It is the highest and most valuable of forms in the natural world because it does not serve as matter to an ontologically superior form (*In de an.* 100,33–37). In defense of his interpretation, he appeals to Aristotle's assertion that it "alone is immortal and eternal" (430a23). Reminding us that Aristotle recognizes a plurality of immortal and eternal divine beings (103,10–13),⁸ he argues that this description can apply to the productive intellect only if it is understood to contrast the productive intellect with other capacities of the human soul (103,13–15).

The potential intellect may be more perplexing than even the productive intellect. As Themistius explains, the developmental and discursive nature of human thought demands that our intellect be potential in some way. Potentiality is the state from which our thoughts and abilities develop, and the condition that enables us to transition from one thought to the next (94,11–13). The problem is that Aristotle appears to endorse an intellect that lacks all formal and material qualities (a noetic equivalent of prime matter) on the assumption that only a pure potentiality is capable of know-

⁷ See, e.g., *De an.* 429a15f.; 429b5f.; and 430a3–5.

⁸ Themistius has in mind the unmoved movers described in *Metaphysics* A 8. But it is interesting to note that Aristotle does not describe either the divine intellect or the unmoved movers as immortal, only as eternal. That Aristotle uses the word "immortal" to describe the productive intellect may be an indication that, as Themistius suggests, this intellect cannot be identified with the divine intellect.

ing all things (429a18–20). The intellect, he argues, cannot possess form of its own, for then it would, like God, be unable to acquire forms other than those it already possesses. This is because one's formal qualities characterize one's nature, so that, should the intellect take on different forms by thinking new and different thoughts, it would stray from its nature. Aristotle thereby reasons that the intellect cannot be anything in actuality before it thinks (429a24), and thereby also denies that it lacks a bodily organ (429a24–27). Themistius suggests that the intellect could not use an organ because its perceptual qualities, such as its being hot or cold, would interfere with the activity of thought (94,32–34).⁹

Themistius may treat the potential intellect as a noetic entity existing separately from the human soul (he describes it as coming to exist in (106,10) and being received by us (104,14)), but he appears to be aware that doing so is problematic. Not only does he report Theophrastus's objection to this line of interpretation,¹⁰ he twice remarks defensively that Aristotle explicitly describes the intellect as such (105,30; 34f.). Still, it is not clear just how Themistius conceives of this noetic entity. He calls it the “forerunner (*πρόδρομος*) of the productive intellect” (103,30), explaining that it is “as the [sun's] ray is to daylight” (103,31). This comparison, in turn, allows him to claim that the productive intellect is more separate than its potential forerunner (106,7). Is, then, the potential intellect causally dependent on its productive counterpart as the sun's rays to the sun? Themistius does not say. But because his intellect is devoid of actuality, it lacks the agency required for the acquisition of knowledge and its transition to a state of active thought. Themistius explains that the productive intellect perfects its potential counterpart by channeling (*ἐπιτοχεύει*, 100,22) its forms to it like a carpenter or smith who could permeate his materials thoroughly (99,16f.). He insists that the union of the two noetic entities produces the human intellect, which has “two definitions – one of matter, the other of creativity” (99,19). But in his view, the compounded intellect does not constitute the essences of human beings because the productive intellect is the source for our ability to do distinctly human things (100,20–22). Thus, by his account, our humanity is explained on appeal to a single transcendent intellect, and not by something that situates us more firmly in the sensible and animal world.

⁹ Scholars debate the form of Aristotle's argument beginning at 429a18. I am here following Themistius' articulation of the argument. See, e.g., Shields 1995; Sisko 1999; and Politis 2001 for alternative renderings.

¹⁰ About the intellect's nature, Theophrastus purportedly wrote: “For that it is nothing in actuality, but all things potentiality, in just the same way as [the capacity for sense-perception], is well-said. For it must not be taken in this way, that it is not even itself (for that is captious), but as being some underlying capacity as in the case of material entities” (107,33–35). For a fuller discussion of this fragment, see Gabbe 2008a.

One might wonder how the productive intellect can permeate and transmit its activity to the potential intellect, when its activity is so different from our own. What principally distinguishes the productive from the potential intellect is its being activity in essence (430a18). Themistius understands this description to mean that the productive intellect is precisely the same as its objects. We may recall that the potential intellect, when in active contemplation, is also what it thinks. However, because it thinks discursively, its nature cannot be tied to its activity. If it were, it would be essentially different from one thought to the next and, when not active, would not even be itself.¹¹ Conversely, because the productive intellect is essentially what it thinks, it does not think at one moment but not at the next, its thinking is not successive, and, unlike the potential intellect which acquires knowledge through sense-perception and the separation of form from matter, it does not depend on an external object for its activity. Its thinking, we are told, is non-discursive insofar as it is immediate and does not pass from form to form: "It has all the forms all together and presents all of them to itself at the same time. For only in this way would its essence and its activity be, as Aristotle says, identical" (100,10f.). Themistius appeals to the potential intellect's status as noetic matter to explain how it can receive the productive intellect's activity but not its nature. Our understanding of the received forms is 'divided', he explains, because of the character of the intellect that receives them. The potential intellect cognizes the forms by means of discursive thought, because the potential intellect is as matter for its productive counterpart and matter particularizes, pluralizes and divides (100,22–26).

Themistius defends the tenability of transcendent-immanency by drawing a parallel to the sun and its light. He writes:

The intellect that illuminates (ἐλλάμπων) is primarily one, while those that are illuminated (ἐλλαμπόμενοι) and that illuminate (ἐλλάμποντες) are, just like light, more than one. For while the sun is one, you could speak of light as in a sense divided among the organs of sight. That is why Aristotle introduced as a comparison not the sun but [its derivative] light [...]. (103,32–35)¹²

The idea seems to be that, like daylight, the productive intellect remains one though divided. However, scholars are not agreed on the interpretation of this passage. The source of the ambiguity lies with the participles ἐλλάμπων, ἐλλαμπόμενοι and ἐλλάμποντες, for it is not obvious what they refer to or how much emphasis they should be given. Verbeke, following Siger of Brabant, takes them all to refer to the productive intellect(s).¹³ In their view, Themistius recognizes a plurality of subordinate productive in-

¹¹ Priscian records Theophrastus as having made the very same observation. See *In de sens.* 29,18–23 and 30,22–25.

¹² With only minor modifications, translations of the *In de an.* are from Todd 1996.

¹³ See Verbeke 1957 for a survey of the historical interpretations of Themistius's productive intellect.

tellecets in addition to a single superior one. The subordinate intellects are thought to illuminate the potential intellects from the illumination they receive from the principal productive intellect. The multiple productive intellects are, thus, both ἐλλαμπόμενοι and ἐλλάμποντες. Aquinas, by contrast, denies the unity of the productive intellect altogether. On his view, each individual has her own productive intellect illuminated by God (ἐλλάμπων), which in turn illuminates her own potential intellect. Taking each participle to refer to a different noetic entity, he thereby reads ἐλλάμποντες as referring to our unique productive intellects and ἐλλαμπόμενοι to our potential intellects. Yet there are many who remain unconvinced that Themistius recognizes a plurality of productive intellects. Averroes, Henry Bate of Malines and M. Bruno Nardi maintain that Themistius's productive intellect is capable of communicating itself to a plurality of souls without losing its unity. Indeed, though Themistius notes that one *could* speak (εἶποις) of light as divided by the objects it illuminates (103,34), he earlier says that light is principally one because the source of light, the sun, is one (103,22f.). Moreover, Themistius argued in the preceding lines that there could not be a plurality of productive intellects because a multiplicity of productive intellects would require differentiation by a distinguishing feature – either form or matter (103,20–32). But if productive intellects cannot possess matter, neither can they differ in their forms or activities. Were they to differ from one another in terms of what they think, an explanation would be needed as to why individuals received the intellects they did. And if an individual received a productive intellect that did not think all of its forms, that person could not think all things, despite Aristotle's insistence to the contrary (429a18). The productive intellect, Themistius concludes, must be one to ensure mutual understanding. "Where otherwise", he asks, "do the shared notions (κοινὰ ἔννοιαι) come from? Where is the untaught and identical understanding of the primary definitions (πρώτων ὁρῶν) and primary axioms (πρώτων ἀξιωμαμάτων) derived from?" (103,38–104,2).

III

Themistius maintains that the productive intellect is in some way responsible for the acquisition and contemplation of the objects of thought. "The actual intellect", he reports, "advances the potential intellect, and not only makes it an actual intellect, but also constitutes its potential objects of thought (τὰ δυνάμει νοητά) as actual objects (ἐνεργείᾳ νοητά)" (99,1–3). Our goal is to understand how it does so.

In Aristotle's view, the objects of thought (νοητά) are the intelligible forms that account for essential natures. Articulation of an object's intelligible form will answer the question: What is it to be that object? And because Aristotle holds that forms belong to sensible objects, he believes that

knowledge derives from sense-perception and imagination, the faculty that retains sense impressions. "The objects of thoughts (τὰ νοητά)", he writes, "are in sensible forms (ἐν τοῖς εἶδεσι τοῖς αἰσθητοῖς) [...]" and therefore, no one can learn or understand anything without sense-perceiving" (432a4–8). For this reason, he continues, "when one thinks, one necessarily thinks along with an image (ἅμα φαντάσματι)" (432a8f.). It is not clear how Aristotle conceives the role of images in thinking. He elsewhere describes intellection as thinking the form in the image (ἐν τοῖς φαντάσμασι, 431b2). What is certain is that images have particularity and are therefore not thoughts. But because they contain or represent the form of sensible objects, they are aptly described as intelligibles in potency.

According to Themistius, the productive intellect enables us to grasp the form of an object thanks to its action on both the potential intellect and the intelligibles in potency. He writes:

As light when supervening on potential sight and potential colors produces both actual sight and actual colors, so too this actual intellect advances the potential intellect, and not only makes it an actual intellect, but also renders its potential objects of thought as actual objects. (98,35–99,2)

The comparison made here between the productive intellect and light has its source in the *De Anima*. Aristotle there writes that the productive intellect is "as a state (ὡς ἔξις τις) such as light, for in a manner light makes potential colors actual" (430a15–17). Yet, on his theory, light actualizes the visual faculty as well as colors.¹⁴ His analogy thus suggests that the productive intellect plays the dual role attributed to it by Themistius. Still, we must ask how far Themistius means to press the comparison. Does he take it to show simply *that* the productive intellect actualizes the potential intellect and its objects both, or does he also conceive it to show *how* the actualization is accomplished? The difficulty is that Themistius, on the one hand, employs the simile of light and the language of illumination, but, on the other hand, writes that the productive intellect "channels (ἐπὶ τοῦ ἐπετεύεται) its activity to the potential intellect" (100,22), "fully constitutes its disposition [for thinking]" (ἐξ ἡν κατασκευάζει, 98,32) and "is most like a god; for god is indeed in one way the things that are themselves, but in another their supplier" (χορηγός, 99,24f.). Our aim is to reconcile the claims that knowledge is communicated directly from the productive intellect, but is also acquired through its action on both the potential intellect and the potentially intelligible.

There are a number of ways to approach this interpretive problem. We might, for instance, downplay the significance of the light analogy by rejecting the idea that Themistius espoused a theory of illumination. Conversely,

¹⁴ For details on light's nature and role in vision, see Aristotle's *De im.* 418a26–b20 and *Sens.* 438b2–16.

we might take seriously his language of illumination and, instead, deemphasize the productive intellect's role as communicator of forms. The prevailing view is that the productive intellect operates like light in the most literal sense. Davidson even characterizes Themistian intellection in terms of perception.¹⁵ He writes:

In other words, the active intellect, functioning as a sort of light, activates both images in the soul, which are potential thoughts, and the human potential intellect; and it thereby enables the potential intellect to *perceive* actual thoughts and to become actual itself. (Davidson 1992, 26. The emphasis is mine.)

To take Themistius's use of 'light' at face value is to ascribe to him a theory of illumination according to which the intellection of forms is both immediate and infallible. For this interpretive approach treats the acquisition of forms as directly analogous to the activity of seeing. Aristotle holds that one will straightaway see when the appropriate conditions obtain (when there is light and the eyes are properly functioning), because seeing does not develop and progress through the course of time. To use his expression, as soon as one sees one has seen.¹⁶ Further, it is his view that one cannot err with regard to the proper objects (418a14f.). Error in perception does occur, but, he explains, only in the judgment of what is perceived and where it is. (If, for instance, a woman sees yellow because of jaundice, her sensing of yellow is accurate because her eyes are yellow, though her judgment that her environs are yellow is not.)

On the theory of illumination commonly attributed to Themistius, the acquisition of forms (as opposed their contemplation)¹⁷ is made immediate by the illuminative powers of the productive intellect. So while our knowledge is derived from sense-perception, our experiences serve only as preparation for the understanding achieved through this divine or divine-like operation. Therefore, the acquisition of forms does not require either reflection or the application of a methodological procedure to our experiences. If,

¹⁵ See also Moraux 1978, 311; Taylor 2007, 136; and Verbeke, 1957, LVIII. Comparing Themistius's interpretation to Aquinas's, who endorses a robust theory of illumination, Verbeke writes: "[...] la différence entre Thémistius et saint Thomas consiste dans le fait que, pour ce dernier, l'action de l'intellect agent se rapporte uniquement aux données sensibles en vue de les rendre intelligibles, tandis que pour le commentateur grec l'action de l'intellect actif vise directement l'intellect réceptif et les intelligibles en puissance: les deux sont directement actualisés par l'intellect actif."

¹⁶ See *Meta.* Θ 6, 1048b23, b33; and *Sens.* 6, 446b2f.

¹⁷ Aristotle says that as soon as one understands, one has understood, and as soon as one thinks, one has thought (1048b23f.). But we need not think that he is here making reference to the immediate and infallible 'process' by which we come to possess the forms. Aristotle may only mean that the activity of thinking is complete – i.e., non-progressive. And it is a truism that one cannot be in error with regards to what one knows. Thus, the theory that the contemplation of forms is both immediate and infallible is unproblematic.

for instance, we wanted to know what it is to be a human being, we need not ask ourselves what distinguishes human beings from other animals or what special features we have that are most salient for explaining what we are. And surveying the opinions of our predecessors will provide no insight into our investigation. The presence of the right image is, theoretically, all that is necessary for the apprehension of form. Moreover, one cannot be mistaken about the things that are salient to an explanation of what *x* is or why *x* is so. Because our knowledge is owed to the activity of a transcendent noetic entity, there is no room for error. Thus, the prevailing view takes Themistius to endorse a theory of intuition – a kind of non-discursive, or non-inferential, thinking. There is, in addition, a more radical form of non-discursive thinking – namely, thinking that is non-propositional. This form of consciousness involves thinking an object of thought without thinking anything about it. I shall in due course discuss whether either type of thinking has a place in Themistian noetics. But we might first note that Aristotle was similarly thought to have espoused such a theory.

One could easily conclude from the opening lines to his discussion of νοῦς that Aristotle endorses an illumination theory of intellection. For his investigation proceeds on the assumption that thinking is analogous to sensing (429a13–18). Furthermore, by calling the intelligible objects ‘indivisibles’ (τὰ ἀδιαιρέτα, *De an.* III 6, 430a26, b6) and ‘incomposites’ (τὰ ἀσύνθετα, *Meta.* Θ 10, 1051b17) and asserting that they are known by contact (θιγείν, 1051b24), “in a simple time and by a simple act of the soul” (430b15),¹⁸ he seems to suggest that the objects of thought are grasped by a special mode of intellection – one that necessarily yields the truth.¹⁹ And these remarks, in turn, appear to support a reading of the last chapter of the *Posterior Analytics*, whereby Aristotle was thought to treat νοῦς as an intuitive faculty responsible for the apprehension of the first principles.²⁰ However, the view that we intuit the intelligible objects is currently out of favor and it is not hard to see why. The idea that our knowledge of forms is acquired by an act of intuition or illuminative abstraction runs counter to our experiences. On this view, the apprehension of forms should be neither laborious nor subject to error, when the history of philosophy attests to the difficulty of articulating definitions. And as M. Frede points out, such a view supposes that we acquire forms individually and in a piecemeal fashion.²¹ But understanding what something is involves discerning its essential features, explaining how

¹⁸ Berti 1978 provides a non-intuitionist account of Aristotle's indivisibles and incomposites. Yet with little explanation, he ties Themistius to the view that Aristotle's use of these terms demonstrates that he ascribes to a form of Platonic intuitionism. See, in particular, page 146 and note 28.

¹⁹ See *De an.* III 6, 430a26f.; b29f.; *Meta.* Θ 10, 1051b25f.

²⁰ This, for instance, is W. D. Ross' reading. See pages 47–51 of his introduction to his text and commentary of Aristotle's *Prior and Posterior Analytics*.

²¹ See Frede 1996, 171 for his account of concept acquisition.

these features relate to its other necessary but non-essential attributes, and articulating how this object relates to other things and phenomena. Therefore, the acquisition of forms is contingent upon sundry experiences and inchoate bits of knowledge – all of which need to be generalized, systematized and structured. Finally, the acts involved in intuition are difficult to understand. Most troubling is the notion that images are subject to transformation – that enmattered forms, the forms of natural and mathematical objects which are somehow latent in the images stored in memory, need to be actualized before the potential intellect can grasp hold of them. If the productive intellect were to act on images so as to render them capable of affecting or, as it were, being ‘seen’ by the potential intellect, they would have to be made universal and incorporeal – that is, they would have to be transformed into a thought. But such a theory makes the potential intellect redundant, because it allows there to be thoughts without intellects thinking them.²²

Returning to Themistius, we might ask why interpreters so often suppose him to endorse a theory of illumination. R. Taylor, who offers the best reason, believes Themistius’s productive intellect to be the source for our knowledge by thinking the extent of what we can know. His reading hinges on the ambiguity of passage 103,32–35, wherein Themistius makes mention of the illuminating (ἐλλάμποντες) and illuminated (ἐλλαμπόμενοι) intellects. Taylor takes Themistius to recognize a single transcendent productive intellect that engenders a multitude of immanent illuminating intellects. On his interpretation, these so-called ‘actual intellects’ produce knowledge by the illuminative power they derive from the content of the productive intellect’s thought.²³ The subordinate intellects, he holds, do not think the forms lest we all share the same knowledge.²⁴ The human intellect produces its own

²² On the assumption that (a) the senses perceive only sensible qualities like colors, smells, sounds and (b) images are mere by-products of the senses’ activity, C. H. Kahn argues that the intellection of form cannot proceed by the transformation or actualization of images. “Otherwise”, he writes, “something would come from nothing [... because] we do not perceive either that they are individuals or that they are of a definite kind” (Kahn 1981, 407). Kahn’s suggestion, ultimately, is that the intellect must have an intimate relation with the senses in order to account for the way humans perceive. Perception for us is concept laden and, hence, requires the involvement of the intellect. This involvement, in turn, makes the abstraction of form from images unnecessary, since the intellect must already possess concepts for images to serve as the basis for abstractive intellection. Kahn does not attribute to Themistius a theory of illuminative abstraction, but he does criticize him for insisting that the senses alone perceive individuals as individuals of a certain kind – the very assumption that makes possible any theory of illuminative abstraction (Kahn 1992, 371f. note 24). However, Themistius makes no such mistake. See Gabbe 2008b for Themistius’s account of incidental perception.

²³ Taylor 2007, 128 and 136.

²⁴ Taylor 2007, 135f.

thoughts and it does so via illuminative abstraction and forms that preexist in the transcendent intellect.

If Themistius does believe the productive intellect to think the extent of what humans can know, then there is no getting around it – he ascribes to Aristotle a theory of intuition. Indeed, two remarks would lead one to this supposition. We are told that the productive intellect “has all the forms all together” (100,9) and that, in order for the potential intellect to be capable of knowing all things, it must think “all objects” (103,30–32). But these remarks must be taken in their proper context. Themistius makes the first remark shortly after explaining that the productive intellect does not think the forms of the natural world. He writes: “Being both intellect and object of thought, it is precisely the same, [... and not] on account of another [object], like the remaining objects of thought that the intellect καθ’ ἑξῆς produces by separating them from matter” (99,38–100,3). The intellect καθ’ ἑξῆς – the intellect with the disposition to think – apprehends the forms of the natural world by separating them from their particularizing conditions. Hence, because the apprehension of these forms depends upon the existence of sensible objects and because the productive intellect’s activity and essence are due to itself, Themistius concludes that it cannot think them.

That Themistius’s productive intellect thinks less objects than its potential counterpart is further evidenced by his response to the objection that superiority is commensurate with the number of objects thought. He writes: “a more valuable intellect is not one that thinks a greater number of [objects], but one that thinks better [objects]” (112,6). In Themistius’s view, the first cause can think only itself, “what is form most of all” (112,2). This is because its complete detachment from potentiality and privation precludes it from thinking anything else. His productive intellect, by contrast, is intimately tied to the natural world and so is not quite as limited as the first cause. However, because it too lacks potentiality, it cannot cognize privations, matter, and objects that are bad (114,36–115,1). Because the definitions of natural objects implicate (συνεφέλεται) matter (7,29; 114,21), only the human intellect, which manifests potentiality, can think them.

For Themistius, most of what we come to know, including the principles of science, are not intuited by cosmic transmission or participation. Our ability to apprehend forms does not depend upon access we have to forms that exist separately from the physical world. What, then, does he mean when he describes the productive intellect as having “all the forms all together” (100,9) and thinking “all objects” (103,30–32)? I suggest that the ‘all’ in these quotes is qualified. It does not mean ‘all that there is to know’, but ‘all that it does and must of necessity know’.

IV

Let us begin our investigation into the productive intellect's role and function afresh, since our analysis has so far been negative. Themistius reports that the productive intellect furnishes the potential intellect with a *ἐξίς* for *νοεῖν*: "it perfects the suitability (*εὐφύειαν*) of the soul for thinking (*τὸ νοεῖν*), and fully constitutes its disposition (*ἐξιν κατασκευάζει*)" (98,31f.). Generally speaking, Themistius could mean one of two things: either that the productive intellect perfects the potential intellect as the proximate cause of its knowledge, that it does so indirectly by giving the potential intellect the power to acquire the objects of thought by itself. The prevailing view takes Themistius to espouse the former position insofar as it presumes the productive intellect to actualize intelligible forms by direct action on the images. The assumption is that the potential intellect cannot gain insight into the causes and essences of things by itself, and so, in order for it to *νοεῖν*, it must be stockpiled with the forms. The alternative view, by contrast, allows the potential intellect to acquire knowledge by means of the ability it receives from the productive intellect to think in the broadest sense of the word.

The first place to look for clarity on this issue is Themistius's account of *νοεῖν*, which can be construed as evidence for the prevailing view much in the way that certain of Aristotle's remarks can be taken as evidence for some kind of divine insight. Themistius reports that *νοεῖν* is the grasping of the simple definitions (*τοὺς ἀπλοῦς ὅρους*, 30,25) and involves the direct encounter (*ἐπιβολή*) and contact (*θίξις*) with the objects of thought (30,32). However, he later reports that "the intellect's *ἐπιβολή* with the objects of thought for someone who already has the *ἐξιν* is, just as the activity and *ἐπιβολή* of a specialist relative to his objects, not a movement but an activity, since it is of something perfect and is perfect itself" (112,30–32).²⁵ This remark suggests that he understands *ἐπιβολή* and *θίξις* to indicate the insight we obtain once in possession of knowledge, rather than a mode by which we apprehend the objects. Moreover, he interprets Aristotle's description of the objects of thought as uncombined as a reflection of the unity of the thing known and the intellect's general ability to think in an indivisible amount of time.²⁶ The intellect, he states, does the same when it combines these simple things signified in an act of discursive thinking: "This <ability> is just one of the marvels of the intellect" (110,22).

But might Themistius countenance non-propositional thinking nonetheless? In his 1970 article, A. C. Lloyd argued that non-propositional thinking, what he understands by *νοεῖν*, is a genuine form of thinking. On the

²⁵ Cf. *In de an.* 30–32 and 111,18–24.

²⁶ Themistius devotes much of his paraphrase of chapter six of book three of the *De Anima* to this issue. See, in particular, *In de an.* 109,4–112,24.

assumption that *διανοεῖσθαι* (discursive thinking) differs from *νοεῖν* in that it involves the transition from one thought to the next, Lloyd supposes that it must be possible to *νοεῖν* concepts apart from their occurrence within a proposition. This would happen, he argues, if a person were interrupted in the course of thinking a propositional statement. And in this case, the person would know and think of some object without thinking anything about it. Hence, in his view, *διανοεῖσθαι* requires *νοεῖν*.

Themistius addresses the question of whether *νοεῖν* is a part of *διανοεῖσθαι*. And were he to draw the same conclusion as Lloyd, we would have grounds for supposing, not just that *νοεῖν* is for him non-propositional, but also that his productive intellect operates as a proximate cause of the objects of thought. For on this account of *διανοεῖσθαι*, the grasping of the simple definitions would be required for the most basic type of thinking and, hence, the potential intellect would be precluded from acquiring its objects through ordinary reflection. However, Themistius's concern in addressing this question reveals that he does not share Lloyd's account of *νοεῖν* and *διανοεῖσθαι*. Themistius writes that if *διανοεῖσθαι* involved *νοεῖν*, then the lesser activity would require the superior. It would be as if the craftsman's job were to know wood and stone in and of themselves, as opposed to knowing them only in their combination (30,28–30). Accordingly, Themistius distinguishes the two kinds of thinking, not in terms of their mode of apprehension, but in terms of their relation to the objects of thought:

Just like the contrast between poor sight and clear vision, *νοεῖν* involves an ἐπιβολή (direct encounter) and θίξις (contact) with the object of thought, whereas *διανοεῖσθαι* is like a movement in the direction of the object that amounts to an approach in a state too weak to retain the object without its being dispersed. (30,32–34).

Διανοεῖσθαι, we are told, describes the kind of thinking used to obtain knowledge of the object, *νοεῖν* the thinking employed once knowledge is achieved. Hence, he calls the objects combined in discursive thinking “the simple things signified” as opposed to “the simple things defined”, his preferred expression for the objects of *νοεῖν*.²⁷

We can learn more about the productive intellect's role in human thought by examining Themistius's account of intellectual development in the passage quoted below. As we shall see, there is no explicit mention of the productive intellect here (Themistius has yet to introduce it); however, when this passage is paired with a later description of the productive intellect's effect on its potential counterpart, a picture emerges of what state it brings about and how. Themistius writes:

Now this potential intellect comes into existence even among infants. But when, from the objects of perception (ἀπὸ τῶν αἰσθητῶν) and imaginings of them (τῶν ἀπὸ τούτων φαντασιῶν) and the training associated with them (τῆς περὶ ταῦτα γυμνασίας),

²⁷ Cf. 109,6, 10, 18; 112,14; and 30,24f.

it is able to hunt the universal and group together what is similar in dissimilar objects and what is identical in different objects (τὸ καθόλου δύνηται θηρεύειν καὶ συνάγειν τὸ ὁμοιον ἐν τοῖς ἀνομοίοις καὶ τὸ ταύτων ἐν τοῖς διαφόροις), it then becomes a more perfect intellect, analogous to someone with specialized knowledge who has latched on to the theorems of his discipline and is able to be active by himself by making each of them individually available for himself, without the need for any external instruction. At that stage too, therefore, the intellect is in potentiality, yet not in the same way as before it learnt (μαθεῖν) or made discoveries (εὗρεῖν). For something like the capacity for sight, not previously present in it, comes to be in it, in that it can see similar and dissimilar objects, and what [in those objects] is identical and different, and is implied and is in conflict (ἐγγίνεται γὰρ οἷον ὄψις αὐτῷ πρότερον οὐκ ἐνούσα ὁρατικὴ τῶν ὁμοίων καὶ τῶν ἀνομοίων καὶ ἑτέρου καὶ ἀκολουθου καὶ μαχομένου). (95,9–19)

Described above are two levels of intellectual achievement. The first level of perfection corresponds to the achievement of an ordinary person who has not received a specialized education. This person has a grasp of universal concepts such that she can appropriately group together (συνάγειν) dissimilar things and recognize when discrete objects share certain features or causes in common. She is not, however, able to articulate fully what essentially characterizes the groups of objects, because she cannot provide definitions or articulate the causes of why some thing or fact is so. Thus, she has linguistic competency, but only a non-scientific grasp of the concepts she uses. By contrast, the second level of perfection characterizes someone who has obtained scientific and theoretical knowledge. Themistius reports that obtaining this level of expertise requires knowing the totality of theorems belonging to that discipline (95,23–25). A person with this knowledge will have in her command the primary definitions and axioms, as well as the propositions or theorems derived from them. And her knowledge will be evidenced by her ability to call the axioms and theorems to mind without external aid.

It will prove useful to make a few observations about the quote above before turning to our second passage. The first thing to note is that the two levels of intellectual completion are brought about in entirely different ways. Linguistic competency requires the activity of the sense faculties alongside some training associated with them; scientific and theoretical understanding require learning and discovery. Second, there is nothing mysterious or magical about how either of these *ἐξεις* are obtained. The intellect develops from sense-experience and training led by our parents and caregivers. By means of these activities, we learn to group together things that are relevantly similar and apply generalized terms to objects, attributes, and phenomena. We seek the principles and theorems of a science using our weak and inchoate grasp of the universal, because at this point we possess language skills by which we can learn through enquiry and study. Third, the only remark in the quote above that could resonate with the proponents of the illumination theory involves the reference to the capacity for sight that

springs up during some late stage of our development (95,17f.). One might think that this capacity refers to the productive intellect. However, our newly endowed 'vision' does not explain our ability to apprehend or acquire forms; rather, it characterizes our state once in possession of knowledge. With knowledge we have the ability to see with clarity and precision what is similar and identical in different objects and what it is implied by and in conflict with this piece of understanding. And we might note that Themistius's use of vision is here consistent with his use of ἐπιβολή and θίξις.

It is striking that Alexander of Aphrodisias also recognizes these same levels of intellectual perfection, because he does not conceive the productive intellect as the proximate cause of our thoughts.²⁸ Like Themistius, Alexander maintains that the perfected or 'acquired' intellect possesses scientific and theoretical knowledge.²⁹ He explains that this ἔξις is characterized by the knower's (or intellect's) ability to think in absence of external resources and holds that it belongs only to the most gifted and disciplined. Moreover, Alexander concedes that all humans share in this ἔξις insofar as we all have some apprehension of the universal and some synthetic knowledge³⁰ – that is to say, insofar as we all have linguistic competency and some common sense. According to Alexander, this first level of perfection is acquired as we grow and mature much in the way that we learn to walk: it develops naturally with some practice over time.³¹

The productive intellect, in Alexander's view, plays only an indirect role in the acquisition of knowledge. Alexander explains that what is being most or all, or what most especially manifests some property, is the cause of other things and properties of this sort (88,26–89,1). Therefore, since the productive intellect is the most intelligible of beings (88,25), it is the cause of all things intelligible. Still, he does not mean that the productive intellect produces actual thoughts; for it does not communicate form or illuminate those contained in images. It is responsible for the intelligibility of the cosmos insofar as it is the ultimate cause of its structure, order, stability and beauty – the very qualities that make it knowable.

²⁸ Alexander's *De Anima* is not exactly a commentary on Aristotle's. He wrote one, but it is now lost. Yet because he endorses Aristotle's account of the soul, his treatise reads like an exposition of his master's. See *DA* 2,4–9.

²⁹ See, for instance, Alex. *DA* 82,1–3.

³⁰ Alexander states that it is best to call the intellect that has obtained this first level of achievement the "common intellect" (ὁ κοινὸς νοῦς) as opposed to the "acquired intellect" – his name for the intellect possessed of scientific knowledge (82,14). Themistius also recognizes a common intellect, but he identifies it with Aristotle's παθητικὸς νοῦς. Compare lines 106,14f. of Themistius's paraphrase with lines 430a23–25 of Aristotle's *De Anima*.

³¹ See Alex. *DA* 82,1–15. Themistius also analogizes intellectual development to walking and then running (*In an. post.* 65,24–28).

That Themistius also does not make the productive intellect the proximate cause of our thoughts can be argued from analysis of the following passage, wherein he describes the potential intellect before and after being affected by the productive intellect:

[The] actual intellect advances the potential intellect, and not only makes it an actual intellect, but also constitutes its potential objects of thought as actual objects. These are the enmattered forms, i.e., the universal thoughts (κοινὰ νοήματα) assembled from particular objects of perception. Up to this point the potential intellect cannot discern (διακρίναι) <the universal thoughts>, make transitions from one thought to the other, or combine and divide them. Instead, like a store-house of thoughts (θησαυρὸς νοημάτων), it deposits (τίθησιν) the imprints from perception and imagination through the agency of memory. But when the productive intellect encounters it and takes over this 'matter' of thoughts, the potential intellect becomes one with it, and becomes able to make transitions, and to combine and divide thoughts and to observe thoughts from the [perspective of] one another. (99,1–10)

The passage opens with the claim that the productive intellect furnishes the potential intellect with the objects of thought. He describes these as the enmattered forms, having in mind the intelligible forms of natural and mathematical entities. Prior to its joining with the productive intellect, the potential intellect cannot in any way apprehend the forms apart from their matter and, therefore, cannot form propositions, make judgments or draw inferences. In other words, it cannot think discursively because it does not have concepts at its disposal. Its work consists solely in the depositing of "imprints from perception and imagination through the agency of memory" (99,7f.). At this point, the potential intellect is cognizant of the meld of sense-experiences preserved by imagination and memory but unable to make any sense of them. Thus, we can conclude that the productive intellect enters the human soul before the individual begins to attach words to objects and that it has some role in the actualization of both *ἐξείς*.

There is nothing in this passage to suggest that the productive intellect perfects the potential intellect at either stage by its power to illuminate images and stockpile it with the forms. Themistius says that we acquire concepts by tracking or hunting down (θηρεύειν) the universal from the objects of perception (95,11).³² The verb *θηρεύειν* itself suggests that the search for the universal is a process unfolding over time – a process that can admit of error. In fact, Themistius typically uses *θηρεύειν* in place of, or in connection with, some kind of inquiry.³³ And while concept mastery cannot involve a genuine inquiry – at this stage of our intellectual development we do not have linguistic competency – his verb choice suggests that, at the very least, it involves some kind of procedure with regard to our sense-per-

³² Aristotle uses this verb in *An. post.* I 31, 88a3 in connection with our search for the universal.

³³ Cf. his use of *θηρεύειν* at lines 5,10, 42,8 and 49,34 of his paraphrase of the *De Anima*.

ceptions. Moreover, if the productive intellect gives to the potential intellect the capacity to track down the universal, then for Themistius, our ability to engage our intellects must happen *before* they are stockpiled with concepts. The prevailing interpretation cannot accommodate this idea. Scholars insist that the productive intellect is required for the actualization of the intelligible objects on the assumption that the potential intellect lacks the agency to think prior to being possessed of the forms. Yet the suggestion of the above passage is that the productive intellect perfects its potential counterpart by giving it the ability to form concepts by itself.

Now if the productive intellect is not the proximate cause of concept acquisition, it does not provide us with insight into definitions and essences either. Themistius tells us that discursive reasoning advances us to knowledge of the object (30,32–34), that “we ought [...] more than anything else inquire (ζητεῖν) into the forms without matter” (112,23), and that “the intellect καθ’ ἑξιν (presumably, the intellect possessed of universal concepts) produces the objects of thought by separating them from matter” (100,2f.). Indeed, we see him put these ideas into practice in the opening to his paraphrase. In *De Anima* I 1, Aristotle discusses how best to approach the inquiry into the soul. Themistius gives substantial attention to this introductory chapter and reports that the following are useful for discovering essences and articulating definitions: (a) understanding the problems that beset an inquiry (5,1–3); (b) tallying the properties of the object under investigation (5,3–26); and (c) considering the opinions of one’s predecessors (8,38–9,2). These observations and reflections, Themistius notes, will not necessarily or universally lead to a correct definition, because there is no single way of seeking definitions (5,26–30). The task, he says, is very difficult and he remarks that the methodology for providing definitions was under dispute even in his day:

For even today it is disputed among philosophers what in general the method of definition is, and by what procedure it progresses [...]. For [...] some believe that there is a single method [...] but] others [believe] that [...] the ways of dealing with definitions differ in accordance with differences in things that exist. (2,9–16)

Such sensitivities fly in the face of the illumination reading. We could hardly be mistaken or struggle to find the best approach to the discovery of a definition, if the productive intellect makes essential natures manifest to us. It looks, then, as if Themistius takes the productive intellect to actualize its potential counterpart by giving it the ability, first, to acquire concepts, and, then, by means of ordinary thinking, to discover definitions and essences. But if this is the case, then we must conclude that his productive intellect plays only an indirect role in the actualization of the intelligible forms.

There is clear precedence for this kind of approach to knowledge formation in the *Mantissa*, a treatise on the intellect attributed to Alex-

ander of Aphrodisias.³⁴ In this work, it is explained that the productive intellect perfects the potential intellect by being thought. The theory is that by thinking the productive intellect, what lacks all matter, we obtain the impetus and ability to acquire the objects of thought from images produced by sense-perception. The productive intellect serves as a model to imitate and, thereby, gives us the ability to separate and abstract form from matter (108,19–26). It remains, then, for us to say how in Themistius's view the productive intellect furnishes its potential counterpart with the ability to learn and think. I have so far argued that the productive intellect does not literally illuminate forms in images, but the same cannot be said for its role as communicator. Thus our question becomes: What forms does the productive intellect channel to its potential counterpart so as to give it the ability to acquire concepts and knowledge for itself?

Because Themistius did not make his views explicit, we can only speculate as to what he had in mind. Davidson suggests that the productive intellect directly communicates the shared notions and the primary definitions and axioms. His evidence comes from the following passage:

There is no need to be puzzled if we who are combined from the potential and actual [intellects] are referred back to one productive intellect [...]. Where otherwise do the shared notions (κοινὰ ἔννοιαι) come from? Where is the untaught and identical understanding of the primary definitions (πρώτων ὅρων) and primary axioms (πρώτων ἀξιωμαμάτων) derived from? For we would not understand one another unless there were a single intellect that we all shared. (103,36–104,3)

It is easy to see how Davidson arrived at his interpretation. Insofar as the primary definitions and axioms are untaught, they might very well be channeled directly to and, thus, intuited by the potential intellect.³⁵ However, Themistius earlier reported that "the primary definitions are those forms that the intellect thinks by extraction from matter" (22,5f.). Thus, the primary definitions are known from sense-perception and, presumably, untaught insofar as they cannot be demonstratively proven.

I have a different suggestion founded upon Themistius's characterization of linguistic competency and scientific knowledge. Recall that he characterizes concept mastery in terms of the ability "to group together (συνάγειν) what is similar in dissimilar objects and what is the same in different things" (95,11f.) and knowledge in terms of seeing "similar and dissimilar objects

³⁴ Because of the discrepancies between Alexander's *De Anima* and the *Mantissa*, it is not clear whether the latter is a genuine treatise or whether the conflicts are a manifestation of it being either an earlier or later work with respect to the former.

³⁵ I take it that Themistius is here referring to the common and proper principles of a science. In *Posterior Analytics* I 10, Aristotle distinguishes between principles that are common to all sciences, such as the principle of non-contradiction and the proposition that equals removed from equals leaves equals. The proper principles are the definitions or axioms of the things with which a particular science is concerned.

and what [in those objects] is the same and different, and is implied and in conflict" (95,17–19). What is striking is his casting of these rational states in terms of our varying ability to discern similarity, sameness and difference. Themistius uses similar expressions to explain the acquisition of the first principles (or primary definitions) in his paraphrase of the *Posterior Analytics*. There he reports that human beings "are able to unite (συνάπτειν) similar things and apply <the universal to them>" (63,13). He goes on to say that this ability marks the difference between human beings and animals; for all animals have the connate capacity for sense-perception, the source of our knowledge, but we alone can grasp the first principles. We can "group together what is one among the many, what does not differ among the differing and what is the same in the different (τὸ ἓν ἐκ πολλῶν καὶ τὸ ἀδιάφορον ἐκ διαφόρων καὶ ταῦτόν ἐξ ἐτέρων συνάγει)" (64,10f.).³⁶

This problem that Themistius raises – why it is that animals cannot discern the first principles – stems from the assumption that sense-perception genuinely supplies the foundation for our understanding. Thus, he makes much of Aristotle's claim that perception is, in some manner, of the universal.³⁷ According to Themistius, we perceive essential characteristics. "When one sees Socrates, he at the same time sees in him what is similar to the others and what is shared" (64,6f.). Still, Themistius is quick to note that there is a big difference between sense-perception and intellection. The senses may perceive the universal, but it does so as commingled with matter and particularity (64,8f.). The job of the intellect is "to separate, abstract and know the universal with respect to itself" (64,8).

The theory so far is that the potential intellect acquires linguistic competency and scientific knowledge through its ability to organize and systematize the information it receives from the senses. Basically, we acquire the ability to apply universal terms correctly from the practice of grouping together and separating things appropriately, and later, come to know what binds the groups together and what distinguishes one group of things from another by studying and reflecting on the relevant objects that have been so arranged. My proposal, then, is that productive intellect gives to its potential counterpart the ability to assemble, arrange and organize one's experiences and, therefore, gives to it the understanding of sameness and difference – the concepts necessary for the ordering of our sense-perceptions. These relational concepts are among the few that Themistius's productive intellect can think. Moreover, Sameness and Difference are two of the three entities that constitute Plato's soul in the *Timaeus*. (Being is the third.) On the principle that like knows like, Sameness and Difference enable the soul to know the Forms, as well as the constituents of the sensible realm.

³⁶ Contrast this remark from his treatise on the *Posterior Analytics* with lines 95,11f. in his paraphrase of the *De Anima*.

³⁷ See *An. post.* 87b29 and 100a17.

Themistius describes Plato's theory in book one of his paraphrase, and explains his intuition as follows: "When <the soul> groups (συνάγει) the genera and species together, it traces out sameness (τὴν αὐτότητα ἀνιχνεύει), but when it grasps besides the differences (τὰς διαφορὰς προσλαμβάνει), it discovers difference (τὴν ἑτερότητα ἐξευρίσκει)" (11,8–10).³⁸ Notable is the similarity of language by which he characterizes learning for both Aristotle and Plato. I have argued that Themistius does not ascribe to Aristotle a Platonic kind of intellectual intuition or vision. However, he certainly appreciates Plato's contribution and, I believe, puts it to use in a creative and Aristotelian way.³⁹

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³⁸ See *Timaeus*, 35a3–7 and 37a2–c3.

³⁹ I would like to thank the anonymous readers of this article for their extremely helpful comments and criticisms.

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