Themistius' Doctrine of the Three Intellects

Themistius notoriously discovered not two but three intellects in Aristotle's *De Anima*. Besides the two intellects commonly recognized in III.5, he added a lower, mortal form of intellect. This third intellect has been the source of much criticism. Todd (1996) calls it "a perverse interpretation" of Aristotle,and Huby (1991) is dismissive of Themistius' ability to make a coherent philosophy, while Gabbe (2008) has tried to rehabilitate Themistius and his doctrine. In this paper I will re-examine Themistius' doctrine and consider how and why he came to such a strange interpretation of Aristotle's doctrine. Like Gabbe, I believe that there is a consistent doctrine that Themistius is espousing, one that makes a unique and important contribution to Aristotelian studies. Unlike her, however, I do not think that the role of the third intellect can be equated with Aristotle's concept of imagination. Instead I will argue for a more Platonically inspired solution, one that equates the third intellect not with the faculty of imagination but with the irrational soul.

Regarding the two highest intellects in his system, I will argue that Themistius interpreted *De Anima* III.5 in such a way as to guarantee our personal immortality. He thought that Aristotle's active intellect alone was insufficient for the purpose. Indeed, he argued that there was one single active intellect that was shared by all human beings through their several, individual second intellects. Both the first and second intellects were immortal, but the lower of the two allowed for individual survival after death even as it remained united with the higher intellect for all eternity.

Themistius thought that the lowest intellect was a mortal entity that allowed the higher intellects (working together as a unity) to interact with and control the human being. Making use of Plato's *Timaeus*, he argued that this lowest intellect is in fact the soul's irrational faculties, equivalent to the spirited and irrational souls in Plato's philosophy. He used the term "intellect" therefore simply because the third intellect is amenable to the reasoning of the two higher intellects. It is not intellect *per se* but takes on the role of intellect in the body only when it exists in proper relation to the higher intellects. Thus, as Themistius wrote (in keeping with both Plato's *Timaeus* and Aristotle's hylomorphic concept of the soul), this lowest intellect is not immortal and has no role in our disembodied afterlife.

Themistius' doctrine of the three intellects was based on an incorrect interpretation of Aristotle's text, but it cohered as a theory of how the individual thinks—both in an embodied and disembodied state. It also guaranteed some sort of individual immortality. Themistius' might not have been a valid interpretation, but it was a workable doctrine, provided one divorces it from Aristotle's.

Gabbe, M. (2008). "Themistius as a Commentator on Aristotle: Understanding and Appreciating his Conception of *Nous Pathêtikos* and *Phantasia*." *Dionysius* 26, 73-92.

Huby, P. (1991). "Stages in the Development of Language about Aristotle's *Nous*," in Blumenthal and Robinson, 129-143.

Todd, R. B. (1996). *Themistius: On Aristotle's On the Soul*. Ithaca.