

# Plethon's Critique of Aristotle's Theory of Sense Perception in the Light of the 15<sup>th</sup>-Century Controversy on the Philosophy of Plato and Aristotle<sup>1</sup>

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## 1. Introduction

The two major obstacles encountered by a scholar considering the work of Neohellenic philosophers of the 15<sup>th</sup> century are, on the one hand, a lack of up-to-date editions of most of their writings and, on the other, the fact that in the specific case of certain treatises, such as the *Laws* (*Νόμων Συγγραφή*) of Georgios Gemistos, the text that has been preserved to our era is fragmentary and therefore incomplete. Moreover, even though the current research and bibliography on the subject cannot be regarded as sufficient, diverse lines of elucidating 15<sup>th</sup>-century Greek texts have already been drawn<sup>2</sup> and

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1 This paper is of a double origin as for the conception of its subject: its first part initially resulted from reading Plethon's philosophy in the light of early Neohellenic philosophy; some of the material included also appears in my paper entitled "Reconsidering a 15<sup>th</sup> Century Controversy on the Philosophy of Plato and Aristotle" (*Φιλοσοφία. Yearbook of the Research Centre on Greek Philosophy at the Academy of Athens*, 46, 2016, No. 2, pp. 152–162. Its second part was created on the occasion of the international conference entitled "Issues of Perception between Medieval and Early Modern Philosophy" (Ostrava, 6<sup>th</sup>–7<sup>th</sup> October 2016) organised by the Department of Philosophy and the Vivarium – Centre for Research in Medieval Society and Culture of the University of Ostrava and the Czech Society for the Study of Aristotle. It is expected that the approach to the issues suggested here will initiate a new research project at the Academy of Athens, focusing on the philosophy of Plato and Aristotle as interpreted in 15<sup>th</sup>-century Greek scholarship.

2 The account, in the first part of this paper, of the 15<sup>th</sup> c. controversy amongst Greek scholars on the comprehension of the philosophy of Plato and Aristotle is given under the need to overcome the dividing diversity of the ways 15<sup>th</sup> c. Greek philosophy is elucidated in contemporary Greek scholarship. In a similar way, the reference, in the conclusion of this paper, to the issue of the Neohellenic identity, a central notion of the Neohellenic thought from the time of Plethon up to our days and a subject related to the perception of both ourselves and the rest of the world, aims to show that, in terms of appeal within the contemporary Greek cultural heritage, the thought of philosophers and scholars such as Plethon, Bessarion and Scholarios

the need for a coherent and amalgamated understanding of the texts has already become apparent and is under concern. Additionally, the exact degree to which 15<sup>th</sup>-century Greek texts were reflecting the ideas of Western European late mediaeval and early Renaissance philosophy has not been investigated yet, either as direct translations or in the form of assuming someone's alleged thought and expanding on his primary wording and notions.

At the same time, a contemporary scholar must, within the framework of his research, pay tribute and respect to particular and at their time ground breaking approaches, which have marked modern research on the subject under consideration. Such was the dissertation entitled *Georgius Gemistus Pletho's Criticism of Plato and Aristotle* by John Wilson Taylor, who should be regarded as the first scholar who has attempted to come up with a coherent chart presenting the Greek scholars of the 15<sup>th</sup> century involved in the dispute over the priority of Plato's and Aristotle's philosophy, although it was insufficient due to the limited primary sources employed.<sup>3</sup> In this paper, following a memorable form of inquiry set by him in a paper reflecting on Cardinal Bessarion<sup>4</sup> and adopting a textual approach similar to the technique of working with text quotations and excerpts introduced by David Konstan,<sup>5</sup> I will attempt, after giving a bibliographically detailed account of the scholars and treatises involved in the 15<sup>th</sup>-century controversy on the philosophy of Plato and Aristotle, to present specific traces of Plethon's view

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should not be restricted within the chronological boundaries of mediaeval and Renaissance thought, as they are also part of the core from which the Neohellenic thought evolved.

- 3 Taylor, J. W., *Georgius Gemistus Pletho's Criticism of Plato and Aristotle*. Menasha, The Collegiate Press 1921, p. 19. This controversy should be thought of now more in the sense of a *comparatio*, namely of comparative assessments, and less in the sense of a persistent duration in the case of each individual scholar and coherent in argumentation dispute. The accuracy of the diagram suggested by Taylor on page 19 of his treatise is still open to further elaboration, minor corrections and additions, as a great number of texts are (a) still either unedited, or (b) have not been yet thoroughly studied, and (c) the chronological order of many of the writings involved in the dispute has not yet been established.
- 4 Idem, Bessarion the Mediator. *Transactions and Proceedings of the American Philological Association*, 55, 1924, pp. 120–127. Following the example of G. W. Taylor, I have translated here in English the Greek texts presented on the occasion of this paper.
- 5 Konstan, D., Excerpting as a Reading Practice. In: Reydamas-Schils, G. (ed.), *Thinking Through Excerpts. Studies on Stobaeus*. Turnhout, Brepols 2011, pp. 9–22. It is worth noting that working with excerpts, as also working with extracts and quotations taken from treatises the full content of which is sometimes lost, is a process similar to working with pieces of philosophical correspondence or partially edited text. It is not a matter of just selecting, ordering, copying and pasting certain references in view of some fresh re-coordination of their content, but rather a technique and practise of reconsidering philosophical conceptions and their associations – a technique taken out from the same ancient toolbox in which abridgements, synopses, compendia and epitomes are also included, in an attempt to open a new window on the transmission of a cultural heritage.

of sense perception, and of the reaction to it by two of his main adversaries, Cardinal Bessarion and Georgios Scholarios.

## 2. The controversy on Plato and Aristotle

Georgios Gemistos (ca. 1360–1452), also known under the pen name 'Plethon', was a Platonic philosopher who taught in Constantinople, Mistras and Florence.<sup>6</sup> Under his influence, Cosimo del Medici is said to have established the Platonic Academy of Florence,<sup>7</sup> through which Western European thought became acquainted with Plato's philosophical tenets. A major figure in the revival of Hellenic identity in the collective consciousness of the Greeks,<sup>8</sup>

6 A brief and historic account of Plethon's life is included in Δημητράκοπούλου, Α. Κ., *Ὁρθόδοξος Ἑλλάς, ἥτοι Περί τῶν Ἑλλήνων τῶν Ἰραψάντων κατὰ Λατίνων καί περὶ τῶν συγγραμμάτων αὐτῶν*. Leipzig, Metzger und Wittig 1872, pp. 108–109. For a thorough account of the life and works of the philosopher as a social reformer, cf. Matula, J. & P. R. Blum (eds.), *Georgios Gemistos Plethon: The Byzantine and the Latin Renaissance*. Olomouc, Univerzita Palackého v Olomouci 2014; Siniosoglou, N., *Radical Platonism in Byzantium: Illumination and Utopia in Gemistos Plethon*, Cambridge Classical Studies. Cambridge, C.U.P. 2011; Blum, W. & W. Seitter, *Georgios Gemistos Plethon (1355–1452): Reformpolitiker, Philosoph, Verehrer der alten Götter*. Zürich, Diaphanes 2005; Schulze, F., *Georgios Gemistos Plethon und seine Reformatorischen Bestrebungen*. Jena, Mauke's Verlag 1874; Tozer, H. F., A Byzantine Reformer. *The Journal of Hellenic Studies*, 7, 1886, pp. 353–380; Θεοδωρακοπούλου, Ι. Ν., Πληθώνεια, *Λακωνικές Σπουδές*, 3, 1977, pp. 5–35; Σολδάτου, Χρ., *Γεώργιος Γεμιστός Πλήθων*, Ἀθήνα, 1973; Hladký, V., *The Philosophy of Gemistos Plethon. Platonism in Late Byzantium, between Hellenism and Orthodoxy*. Surrey, Ashgate 2014; Woodhouse, C. M., *George Gemistos Plethon. The Last of the Hellenes*. Oxford, Clarendon Press 1986. On Plethon's contribution to the study of rhetoric, cf. Πλήθωνος, Γ., *Συντομία περὶ τινῶν μερῶν τῆς ῥητορικῆς*. Walz, Ch. (ed.), *Rhetores Graeci*. Stuttgart–Tübingen, J. G. Cotta 1832, VI, pp. 542–598; Temmerman, K. de, Ancient Rhetoric as a Hermeneutical Tool for the Analysis of Characterization in Narrative Literature. *Rhetorica. A Journal of the History of Rhetoric*, 28, 2010, No. 1, pp. 23–51; Monfasani, J., *Byzantine Scholars in Renaissance Italy. Cardinal Bessarion and Other Emigrés*. Ashgate, Variorum 1995, pp. 174–187; Stavelas, A., Reconsidering a Fifteenth Century Controversy on the Philosophy of Plato and Aristotle, *Φιλοσοφία*, ed. by the Research Centre on Greek Philosophy of the Academy of Athens, 46, 2016, No. 2, pp. 152–162.

7 This old and rather romantic view was stated by Marsilio Ficino in the prologue of his Latin translation of Plotinus's *Enneads* (Florence, 1492). As Al. Brown notes: "The revival of Platonism in Florence after the arrival there of Plethon in 1439 was particularly important from our point of view, because Plato contributed two vital elements to the new theory of sovereignty that provided the flexibility and authority needed by rulers like the Medici: a secular universal law, which was the basis of Stoic natural law, and the justification of the free rule of the wise philosopher-ruler": Brown, A., Political Thought in Early Modern Europe, I. The Renaissance. *The Journal of Modern History*, 54, 1982, No. 1, p. 53; Hankins, J., Cosimo de' Medici and the 'Platonic Academy'. *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes*, 53, 1990, pp. 144–162; Idem, The Myth of the Platonic Academy of Florence. *Renaissance Quarterly*, 44, 1991, No. 3, pp. 429–475.

8 On this subject, cf. Kaldelis, Ant., *Hellenism in Byzantium. The Transformations of Greek Identity and the Reception of the Classical Tradition*. Cambridge, University Press 2007, pp. 121, 173, 183. On the reception of Plethon's tenets within later Neohellenic thought, cf. Δινάρδου, Ν., Η θρησκευτική και ἔθνική ταυτότητα τοῦ Γεωργίου Γεμιστοῦ Πλήθωνος. Ἐνα παράδειγμα μεταβαλλόμενων ταυτοτήτων στὸν ἑλληνικὸ κόσμο. In: Dimadis, K. A. (ed.), *Identities in the Greek World. Proceedings of the 4th European Congress of Modern Greek Studies*, V, pp. 127–142;

Plethon associated the political shrinkage of the Byzantine Empire with the doctrines of Orthodox theology. Moreover, he regarded the attempts to form a unified Christian Church, made in the course of the Ferrara-Florence Council (1438–1439), as a commercialised sophistry, aiming at political profit, not at the pursuit of truth.<sup>9</sup> Hence, he attempted to construct a comprehensive philosophical and theological system, based on Neoplatonic philosophy and incorporating features of Zoroastrianism. In his treatise entitled *Laws* (*Νόμων Συγγραφή*) he attributed the power and the means for the recovery of the Greek nation to Divine Providence. Within this conception and acting as a quasi-precursor of the Age of Reason,<sup>10</sup> he resorted to a system of universal theism – a novel conception of a universal religion, involving features of Iamblichus’s and Proclus’s syncretic mysticism, in which God is the central notion and piety (*θεοσέβεια*)<sup>11</sup> is the principal virtue, by means of which one may assimilate oneself with God. In response to Plethon, Cardinal Bessarion (1403–1472),<sup>12</sup> his former disciple in the School of Philosophy at Mistras and a dedicated reader of Aquinas, primary Bishop of Nicea, *Latinorum Graecissimus and Graecorum Latinissimus*, held that the subject issue posed by Plethon is explicable only with respect to the theory of ideas and that Plethon’s objections against Aristotle derived from his own endorsement of the Platonic theory of ideas. Additionally, Bessarion proposed that Plethon’s conception, stated in his treatise *De fato* (*Περί είμαρμένης*),<sup>13</sup> viz. that causality should be thought of as belonging

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Cheadle, M. P., *The Vision of Light in Ezra Pound’s The Unwobbling Pivot. Twentieth-Century Literature*, 35, 1989, No. 2, p. 120.

- 9 Τατάκη, Β. Ν., *Ἡ Βυζαντινὴ Φιλοσοφία*, Ἀθήνα, Εταιρεία Σπουδῶν Νεοελληνικοῦ Πολιτισμοῦ καὶ Γενικῆς Παιδείας, 1977, p. 263.
- 10 Peritore, N. P., *The Political Thought of Gemistos Plethon: A Renaissance Byzantine Reformer. Polity*, 10, 1977, No. 2, pp. 168–191; Webb, R., *The Nomoi of Gemistos Plethon in the Light of Plato’s Laws. Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes*, 52, 1989, pp. 214–219.
- 11 For the later development of *θεοσέβεια* under the influence of deism and within the scope of Greek Enlightenment, cf. Καϊρή, Θ., *Γνωστικὴ. Στοιχεῖα Φιλοσοφίας*. Ed. Ν. Σινιόσογλου, Ἄνδρος, Εὐρασία-Καίριος Βιβλιοθήκη, 2008. Καζολέα-Ταβουλάρη, Π., *Θεόφιλος Καΐρης. Ἀπὸ τῆ Φιλοσοφικῆ Ψυχολογία στὴ Θεοσεβικὴ Ἠθικὴ*, Ἀθήνα, Τυπωθῆτω, 2005.
- 12 Mohler, L., *Kardinal Bessarion als Theologe, Humanist und Staatsmann. Paderborn, Ferdinand Schöningh 1927 (vol. II) & 1942 (vol. III)*; Mariev, S. – Marchetto, M. – Lucher, K., *Bessarion. Über Natur und Kunst. Hamburg, F. Meiner 2015*; Keller, A. G., *A Byzantine Admirer of ‘Western’ Progress: Cardinal Bessarion. The Cambridge Historical Journal*, 11, 1955, No. 3, pp. 343–348. Idem, *Two Byzantine Scholars and Their Reception in Italy. Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes*, 20, 1957, No. 3, pp. 363–370. For a short sketch of Bessarion’s life, cf. Karamanolis, G., *Basil Bessarion*. In: Lagerlund, H. (ed.), *Encyclopedia of Medieval Philosophy Philosophy Between 500 and 1500*. Dordrecht et. al., Springer 2011, pp. 145–147.
- 13 Keller, A., *Two Byzantine Scholars and Their Reception in Italy*, op. cit., p. 363. On the discussion upon the the *De Fato* treatise cf. Taylor, G. W., *Tehdore Gaza’s De Fato, University of Toronto Studies. Philological Series*, 7, Toronto, 1925.

to the advanced and superior level of ideas in comparison with empirical data, should not be accepted.

### 3. Textual testimonies on sense perception

Pending Plethon's view upon sense perception, one has to admit that, for him, the relationship between theology and the world of our senses is established as the deity moves the higher part of the soul, which participates in the deity and subsequently moves the lower part of the soul. On this conception Plethon based the relationship of physics to theology, by which physics may become excellent. Within the framework of an absolute theism and an unconditional idealism, the problem for Plethon was that Aristotle seemed to have disregarded God as the creative force, favouring a discussion of the virtues and failing to introduce immortality of the soul. In this view, Aristotle would be regarded as a strict materialist, while Plethon preferred to resort to Zoroastrianism, as initially introduced in Greece by Pythagoras. Plethon's treatise on the shortcomings of Aristotle's philosophy in comparison with the philosophy of Plato, in which Plethon declared Plato to be the superior philosopher of Greek antiquity and qualified Aristotle as ignorant in the most vital issues,<sup>14</sup> was eventually refuted by Georgios Scholarios (1405–1472) in his treatise *Against the Questions of Plethon to Aristotle*.<sup>15</sup>

It is literally a pity and a misfortune that a whole chapter entitled “On the senses and their particulars” (*Περὶ αἰσθήσεών τε καὶ τῶν καθ' ἑκάστας*) of Plethon's treatise *Laws*<sup>16</sup> has not been preserved in the manuscript tradition of his works. Consequently, one is obliged to restrict, at least at this primary level of research, the scope of such an inquiry to the partial references on the subject made by Plethon, as they are found in various parts of his treatises. In the 6th chapter of his treatise *De Platonicæ et Aristotelicæ Philosophiæ Differentia* (*Περὶ ὧν Ἀριστοτέλης πρὸς Πλάτωνα διαφέρεται*) Plethon notes:<sup>17</sup>

14 “Πῶς γὰρ οὐ περὶ τὰ μέγιστα ἀμαθὴς Ἀριστοτέλης.” In: Migne, J.-P. (ed.), *Patrologia Graeca*, 160, 928D4.

15 Δημητρακοπούλου, Γ. Α., Ο ἀντι-Πληθωνισμὸς τοῦ Γεωργίου Σχολαρίου-Γενναδίου Β΄ ὡς ρίζα τοῦ φιλοθωμανισμοῦ του καὶ ὁ Ἀντι-χριστιανισμὸς τοῦ Γεωργίου Γεμιστοῦ-Πλήθωνος ὡς ρίζα τοῦ ἀντι-ἀριστοτελισμοῦ του. In: Διεθνῆς Ἐταιρεία Πληθωνικῶν καὶ Βυζαντινῶν Μελετῶν (ed.), *Πρακτικὰ Α΄ Ἐπιστημονικῆς Συνάντησης «Βυζάντιο, Ὁ κόσμος του καὶ ἡ Εὐρώπη»*, Ἀθήνα-Μυστράς, 2001, pp. 109–127.

16 Γεμιστοῦ Πλήθωνος, Γ., *Νόμων Συγγραφή*, Θεσσαλονίκη, Ζήτηρος, 2005, p. 66.

17 The character of the Greek text in the extracts quoted from this point and thereafter is enigmatic in itself and on several occasions dubious. These attributes had to be preserved in the English translation so as to defend the polysemy of the content, the ambiguity of which had raised in the 15<sup>th</sup> c. a great deal of troubles for Plethon and his colleagues.

Καὶ μὲν δὴ οὐδ' ἂν ἐκεῖνο αὐτῷ ὀρθῶς λέγοιτο, τὸ τὸ αἰσθητὸν πρότερον χρόνῳ οἷον τ' εἶναι τῆς αἰσθήσεως εἶναι, ἀναιροῦντι καλῶς ἔχοντα καθόλου λόγον, ὡς τὰ πρὸς τι τὲ καὶ σχετικὰ ἀναγκαῖον εἶη ἅμα εἶναι. Εἰ μὲν γὰρ ὡς οὐδέ ποτ' ἂν ἐσομένης αἰσθήσεως, πῶς ἂν οἷον τ' εἶη αἰσθητὸν τι εἶναι μῆτε οὔσης, μῆτ' ἂν ποτε ἐσομένης αἰσθήσεως; εἰ δ' ὡς ποτε καὶ ἐσομένης, δῆλον ὅτι ἐκ τῆς δυνατῆς ἂν ἔσεσθαι ἐσομένης ὥστ' ἔσται καὶ τὸ αἰσθητὸν αὐτὸ τε δυνάμει αἰσθητὸν καὶ πρὸς δυνάμει αἰσθησιν, ἢ τε δυνάμει αἰσθησιν πρὸς δυνάμει αἰσθητὸν, ἐνεργίᾳ δ' οὐδέτερον οὐδετέρου πρότερον, πρὶν γ' ἂν ἐνεργίᾳ ἄμφω ᾖ. Καὶ οὕτως οὐ ποτ' ἂν γένοιτο αἰσθητὸν τι αἰσθήσεως πρότερον.<sup>18</sup>

And yet it would not be right for him to say that it is possible for the sensible, which is prior in time, to belong to the function of sense perception (αἰσθησις), against the well-posed universal reason, namely that it would be necessary for those in reference and in relation to coalesce at the same time (ἅμα εἶναι). (And this is so) because, if sense perception could not be established at any time, how could something perceptible via the senses subsist without it, how can it be perceived when sense perception is not present, or is not about to be present? And if sense perception is to be or become present at some future point of time, it is obvious that it becomes present out of the possibility of being present. Thus, the possible object of sense perception will be both a potency of the object to be perceived and also something *referred*<sup>19</sup> to sense

18 Migne, J.-P. (ed.), op. cit., c. 897-900; Lagarde, B., Le 'De differentiis' de Pléthon d'après l'autographe de la Marcienne. *Byzantion*, 43, 1973, pp. 312–343.

19 The *reference*, here mentioned in italics, is a *hyperonym* and has the meaning of the Greek technical term *anaphora*, conceived not just as employed in Greek oratory but within the broader philosophical scope of Greek thought. Traditionally contrasted to *deixis* and nowadays contrasted to *cataphora* or *backwards anaphora*, as in the case of the sentence *If he is lucky, John will win*, *anaphora* is that layer of syncategorematic function in wording which, while falling within the broader category of *relation*, describes a logical relation between the *essence* and the *attribute* of it. For the character and linguistic problems related to *anaphora* in classical Greek, cf. Kiparsky, P., Greek *Anaphora* in Cross-Linguistic Perspective, *Journal of Greek Linguistics*, 12, 2012, No. 1, pp. 84–117. On the place of *anaphora* in the modern logical analysis, in which it is treated (as also *tense*, *adverbial modification*, *identity*, *definite description*, *propositional attitude verbs*, *indexicality* and *modality*) as a logical form, cf. Lamarque, P. V. – Asher, R. E., *Concise Encyclopedia of Philosophy of Language*. Pergamon, B. P. C. Wheatons 1997, p. 23. The crucial point in the case of reference as *anaphora* is to understand that in the core of the act of noting something by making a reference there is also denoted a syncategorematic element of ellipsis. On the syncategorematic function of reference within the discussion of universals cf. Růžička, M., Some Marginal Notes on Polarity and Negation. *Brno Studies in English*, 25, 1999, pp. 43–57.

perception as a potency, and also the potency of sense perception will be *referred* to the potency of the object to be perceived; also, issues that do not subsist have no actual (*ἐνεργία*) priority relating them to each other, but that is possible before their substantiation as actualities. And consequently, it would never be possible for an object of sense perception to become perceptible prior to sense perception itself.

The key term of this passage is Plethon's conception of universal reason<sup>20</sup> as outlined a little earlier:

Παραπλήσιον δ' αὐτῶ κάκεινο, τὸ τὸ μὲν καθόλου τῆ ὕλη φάσκειν ἀνάλογον ἔχειν, τὸ δὲ κατὰ μέρος εἶδει. Τοῦναντίον γὰρ ἂν ἅπαν εἴη, εἷ γε ὄλον μὲν τι τὸ καθόλου, τὸ δὲ κατὰ μέρος μέρος. Τὸ δ' εἶδος πανταχῆ ἐν τῷ ὄλω μᾶλλον ἢ ἐν τοῖς μέρεσι, καὶ ἐνεργία δὲ μᾶλλον τὸ καθόλου ἐστὶν ἢ τὸ κατὰ μέρος. Τὸ μὲν γὰρ καθόλου, καθόλου ἐπ' αὐτῶν τῶν πραγμάτων λαμβανόμενον, αὐτό τε ἐνεργία ἐστὶ καὶ τὰ κατὰ μέρος ἅπαντα ἐνεργία περιέχει· τὸ δὲ κατὰ μέρος αὐτὸ μὲν ἐνεργία ἐστὶ, τὸ δὲ καθόλου ἐν ἑαυτῷ οὐ καθόλου ἔχει, ἀλλ' ὅσον μόνον κάκεινου ἑαυτῷ προσήκει. Καὶ τέλειον μὲν τι τὸ καθόλου, ἀτελὲς δὲ τὸ κατὰ μέρος.<sup>21</sup>

It is in the same way, to say (Aristotle) that the universal has some correspondent to matter and that the particular has some correspondent to species. But everything could be conceived contrary to this statement, if, of course, the universal is an entirety and the particular is a partiality, since the species is in every case to be conceived in entirety rather than in partiality and since it is the universal rather than the particular which is (to be conceived) as active (*ἐνεργία*). [And this may be accepted] because the universal as taken into consideration conclusively on these issues, it is both an actuality (*ἐνεργία*) and an inclusive of all particular partialities; and the partial itself is an actuality on the one hand, while the universal is universal in itself only insofar as it refers to itself. And the universal is perfect, while the partial is incomplete.

20 It is preferable and, I believe, more accurate to render *καθόλου λόγος* as *universal reason*, considering *καθόλου* as an adverbial adjective and not just simply as an adjective, rather than as simply a *general statement*, because of the context of the reference quoted, of the polysemy of *λόγος* in the Greek language, and of the comprehensive and all-encompassing meaning of *καθόλου*.

21 Ibid.

An immediate reply to Plethon's proposals came from Cardinal Bessarion in his treatise *In Calumniatorem Platonis*, in which<sup>22</sup> he stated that what is in issue here is species, matter and privation considered as natural principles (ἀρχαί).<sup>23</sup> Following Aristotle, he explained that Aristotle's *species* corresponds to Plato's notion of *ungenerated and indestructible* (ἀγέννητόν τε καὶ ἀνώλεθρον),<sup>24</sup> differentiating also between noetic entities (νοητὸν ὄν) and proper entities (κυρίως ὄν), between sensible objects, natural principles (φυσικαὶ ἀρχαί) and elements (στοιχεῖα).<sup>25</sup> What was αἰσθητὸν for Plethon was mainly what Bessarion explained as follows:

[...] τὸν αἰσθητὸν τοῦτον καὶ καθ' ἕκαστα ἄνθρωπον οὐκ αὐτὸν ἄνθρωπον εἶναι λέγοντες, ἀλλὰ τῇ μετοχῇ τοῦ αὐτοανθρώπου ἄνθρωπον εἶναι [...].<sup>26</sup>

[...] it is not the conception of man, as a natural species, in the meaning of the separable (χωριστόν) and in the sense of a compound material entity reducible to something immaterial and simple, but it is the share in the humanity of each individual person.

This conception of man as a compound entity refers to the content and the tradition of Aristotle's *On the Soul*, where the soul is essentially (οὐσιωδῶς) comprised of nous, as a potency (δυνάμει) and an actuality (ἐνεργείᾳ), where potency replaces matter and actuality replaces species.<sup>27</sup> And as corporeal entities are comprised of matter and species perceptible via the senses, in the same way separated substances (χωρισταὶ οὐσίαι), apart from the prime one, are comprised by the potency and actuality of the nous in the sense of the *out of which* noetic matter and species or form.<sup>28</sup> Bessarion quotes Averroes,<sup>29</sup> according to whom, “[...] as the object perceptible by the senses is divided into matter and form (or species), in the same way that which is a noetic entity (τὸ νοητὸν εἶναι) is in the same way divisible into something assimilating matter and something assimilating form (or species).”<sup>30</sup>

22 Mohler, L., op. cit., II, ch. 6.

23 Ibid., 1.6.2.1–3.

24 Ibid., 1.6.2.11–12.

25 Ibid., 2.12.5.1.

26 Ibid., 3.3.1.20.

27 Ibid., 3.22.11.5.

28 Ibid., 3.22.12.14.

29 Ibid.

30 Ibid., 3.22.12.14.



Then, referring not to man and his definition but to the world as a sense-perceptible totality (*αἰσθητὸν κόσμον*), Bessarion argues<sup>31</sup> that Plethon's conception of the tangible and feasible world as an image of the mental cosmos would lead to the conclusion that mental essences (*νοηταὶ οὐσίαι*) would necessarily admit of origination and corruption, which should be viewed as absolutely false:

[...] εἰ γὰρ διὰ τὸν αἰσθητὸν κόσμον εἰκόνα εἶναι τοῦ νοητοῦ πάντα τὰ ἐν τῷ αἰσθητῷ καὶ ἐν τῷ νοητῷ εἶναι δεῖ, ἔπεται πάντως καὶ φθαρτόν τι εἶναι ἐν αὐτῷ ὥσπερ ἐνταῦθα. καὶ ὥσπερ ἐν τῷ αἰσθητῷ κόσμῳ τὰ μόρια τῆς ὕλης οὐκ αἰεὶ συμπαραμένουσι τοῖς ἀτομικοῖς αὐτῶν εἶδεσιν, ἀλλ' εἰσὶ δυνάμει πρὸς ἄλλο εἶδος διὰ τὸ τὸ τοιοῦτον εἶδος μὴ ἔχειν πᾶσαν τὴν τοῦ εἶδους τελειότητα, οὕτω καὶ τῷ νοητῷ, ἐπειδὴ εἰσι πλείω τοῦ αὐτοῦ εἶδους ἄτομα, τὰ μόρια ἐκεῖνα τῆς ὕλης οὐκ ἂν συμπαραμένειν αἰεὶ τοῖς αὐτῶν εἶδεσι δύναιντο διὰ τὸ ἐκάστοις αὐτῶν τὴν ὅλην τοῦ εἶδους μὴ περιέχεσθαι τελειότητα, ἀλλ' εἴη ἂν ἐτέρου εἶδους αἰεὶ ἐφιέμενα. καὶ ταύτη γενητὰς εἶναι καὶ φθαρτὰς ἀνάγκη τὰς νοητὰς οὐσίας κατὰ τὸν νέον τοῦτον φιλόσοφον.<sup>32</sup>

[...] if there should be that, for having the sense-perceptible world standing as an image of the noetic one, everything in the sense-perceptible world must subsist also in the noetic one, it follows that there must be something corruptible in itself, as is the case here. And precisely as the particles of matter in the sense-perceptible world cannot all the time stay adherent to their own individual species, but they are potencies *referred* to a different species, as that kind of species does not have the full perfection of (a) species, even in the noetic world, since a greater number of individual (particulars) of the same species subsist there, those particles of matter could not stay adherent continuously to their own species, because the whole perfection of (their) species cannot be included in each of them, but they are brought upon a different species. And in this way it is (shown as) necessary, according to this young philosopher, that the noetic essences admit of generation and corruption.

As Bessarion explains, one is to realise that the whole being is complemented by the nous, the soul and body, that soul is the medium between the

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, 3.24.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, 3.24.1.19.

intellect and the material body, having its essence as mediating, its assets (*ιδιότηται*) eternal in its essence and timely active in its actualities, giving the sense of an essence both indivisible and divisible: the soul of being (or cosmos) indivisible as an image of the noetic universe, divisible in the paradigmatic (exemplary) forms of perception.<sup>33</sup>

Perhaps the most detailed reaction to Plethon's statements on sense perception is to be found in the writings of Georgios Scholarios. For him, the solution to this problem is Aristotle's division of essence into primary and secondary substance, differentiating on the nature of the essence's qualitative attributes (*ιδιότητες*): not everything coalesces with each other in accordance with nature, but only those co-subsist and co-testify the truth of each other, in which there is a two-sided, mutual and permanent order, equally in reason *referred* and really dependable on each other. Because, Aristotle claimed, of the things *referred* to, some have being as their object of reference and others have their object of reference in the wording of the reference – two cases following diverse ratios. In Scholarios's own words:

ὁ Πλήθων ... εἰπὼν γάρ, φησί, περὶ τῶν πρὸς τι, ὅτι ἅμα εἰσὶ τῇ φύσει, κακῶς ἐπήγαγεν ὅτι τὸ αἰσθητὸν δύναται χρόνῳ πρότερον τῆς αἰσθήσεως εἶναι· ἀδύνατον γάρ, φησὶν, εἶναι τι αἰσθητὸν, μήτε οὔσης αὐτοῦ αἰσθήσεως, μήτε δυναμένης εἶναι· ὥστε εἴ τινος αἰσθητοῦ ἢ αἰσθησῆς δυνατὴ ἔστι, καὶ αὐτὸ δυνάμει αἰσθητὸν ἔστι, καὶ ἅμα τέ ἐστιν αὐτὸ δυνάμει αἰσθητὸν, μήπω οὔσης τῆς ἐνεργείας αὐτοῦ αἰσθήσεως, καὶ ἡ δυνάμει αἰσθησῆς αὐτοῦ μήπω ἐνεργεῖα ὄντος ὑπὸ τῇ αἰσθήσει. Καὶ αὐθις ἐπειδὴν θάτερον ἐνεργεῖα ἢ, καὶ τὸ λοιπὸν ἐνεργεῖα ἔστι, καὶ ἅμα εἰσὶν ἄμφω ἐνεργεῖα, καὶ οὐδέτερον οὐδετέρου πρότερον, ἢ ὕστερον.<sup>34</sup>

Plethon [...] was mistaken in concluding that it is possible for the sense-perceptible to be prior to sense perception. Because it is impossible, he says, for something to be perceived by the senses without the presence of sense-perception itself or the potentiality of it becoming present; thus, if the perception of a perceptible is possible, this means that the perceptible is potentially perceptible, and at the same time it is perceptible as a potentiality, namely without the actuality of its perception, and that

33 Ibid., 4.15.2.1–19.

34 Curteses (Scholarios), G., *Contra Plethonis ignoracionem de Aristotele*. Ed. Jugie, M. – Petit, L. – Siderides, X. A. (eds.), *Oeuvres Complètes de Georges (Gennadios) Scholarios*. Paris, Maison de la Bonne Presse 1935, 2.69.37–2.70.9.

its potentiality of being perceived is not yet actualised by the senses. And [i.e., Plethon] states that whenever one of the two cases is actualised, the other is also actualised; thus they are to be conceived as being both active and thus neither of them is prior or posterior to the other.

#### 4. Conclusion

As obvious in this passage, Scholarios's contribution to Neohellenic philosophy and Aristotelian studies is paramount, mainly because of the apparent clarity with which he treats such complex issues. Testifying that “as the awareness of the conceptual begins with the knowledge of the sense-perceptible, we conduct the names employed in sense perceptible awareness towards an intellectual cognizance”,<sup>35</sup> he aligns himself with Aristotle, who noted that the man perceiving something via his senses is somehow making a judgement<sup>36</sup> and with Leon Magentinus (1300-1399), who in rephrasing Aristotle's observation admitted of sense perception as a form of judging.<sup>37</sup> In Scholarios's wording the object of this *conduct* (μεταφορά) is identical with the assets or attributes (ιδιότητες) mentioned also by Bessarion.

For the Neohellenic philosophy, the fundamental and ultimate issue under scrutiny as for the sense and/or intellectually perceptible object of awareness is the issue of the Neohellenic identity and self-identification of the Greeks – an issue utterly dissimilar to that of “national identity” and of the evolvment of a national consciousness, and also a theme quite chaotic in its contemporary interpretations and semantic intermingling of the terms ἔθνος (nation), γένος (genus) and φυλή (clan). These terms are often misconceived and confused with each other, always disregarding the philosophical background of the term γένος when referred to the genus of the Greeks or Hellenes, making its sense less tangible and feasible and, consequently, disregarding the interrelation between γένος and αἴσθησις within the broader scope of the “Neohellenic identity” subject<sup>38</sup> – an enduring requisite of the

35 Ἐπει δὲ ἐκ τῶν αἰσθητῶν ἐπὶ τὴν γνῶσιν τῶν νοερῶν ἀφικνούμεθα, καὶ τῆς αἰσθητῆς γνῶσεως τὰ ὀνόματα πρὸς τὴν νοητὴν μεταφέρομεν γνῶσιν, *Epitome Summae Contra Gentiles Thomae Aquinae*, 3, 53,7–8.

36 *Topica*, 1111a19.

37 “Ἡ αἴσθησις εἶδος τοῦ κρίνειν ἐστίν”, Magentini, L., In *Aristotelis Topicorum Prooemium et Librum Secundum Commentaria*, 1.46,7. In: Kotzabassi, S., *Byzantinische Kommentatoren der aristotelischen Topik*: Johannes Italos & Leon Magentinos, Ἐταιρεία Βυζαντινῶν Ἑρευνῶν 17. Βάνιας, Θεσσαλονίκη, 1999.

38 Cf. Angelou, Ath. D., (co-ed.) “Who am I?” Scholarios' answers and the Hellenic identity, in *Φιλῆλλην. Studies in Honour of Robert Browning*, Bibliothek 17. Venice, Istituto Ellenico di Studi Bizantini e Postbizantini 1996, pp. 1–20.

Greek culture. It is in this spirit that Scholarios's view of sense perception may be highly appreciated and may be considered as more venerable, when compared to the view of many of his contemporaries and many of our contemporary scholars.

## ABSTRACT

In *Categories* 7b36–38 Aristotle prioritized the object of sense perception over the act of perception itself, observing that the withdrawal of the perceptible (*αἰσθητόν*) entails the cancelation of perception (*αἴσθησις*), while the removal of the act of perception leaves the perceptible subsisting. This last point was enough for Plethon to initiate his own critique, advocating that Aristotle did not seem to have endeavoured a solid coalescence between the problems raised in his theory of knowledge and the issues elaborated in his *Metaphysics*.

In an attempt to present these two fields of inquiry as in greater harmony with each other and to shed light on what he considered to be the weak points and contradictions of Aristotle's theory of knowledge, Plethon claimed that Aristotle's view seemed to disprove his own vision of *καθόλου λόγος*, especially insofar as the category of relation (*πρός τι*) is involved. Plethon conceived of relation as of the simultaneous and necessary character of the natural concurrence (*ἅμα τῇ φύσει*, *Cat.*, 14 b 27–28) between the act of perception and its object. Thus, for him, Aristotle's approach should be thought of as false or, at least, as inadequate; first, because an object and an act of perception must always concur naturally and, second, because, in accordance with *Metaphysics* 1010 b 30–32 and *De anima* 425 b 25, if sensible perception (*αἴσθησις*) is not sustained or is withdrawn, the object (*αἰσθητόν*) of a non-subsisting sense perception cannot subsist. On the other hand, if sense perception is to subsist in the future, it is obvious that it will appear out of something potentially subsisting (*δυνάμει ὑπάρχον*). Thus, for Plethon, the object of sense perception is both the potentially perceptible (*δυνάμει αἰσθητόν*) and perception in relation to its potency (*πρός δυνάμει αἴσθησις*).

**Keywords:** Plethon, Bessarion, Scholarios, sense perception