

Aristotle on Place

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1) *Features of place*

In *Physics* (Δ , 4, 210b34-211a6) Aristotle enumerates five features of place:

- i. Place is what contains that of which it is the place.
- ii. Place is not part of the thing it is its place. (Also cf. *Phy.*,¹ Δ , 2)
- iii. The immediate place of a thing is neither less nor greater than the thing.
- iv. Place can be left behind by the thing and is separable. (Also cf. *Phy.*, Δ , 2) Aristotle connects our understanding of place with locomotion: ‘place would not have been thought of, if there had not been a special kind of motion, namely that with respect to place. It is chiefly for this reason that we suppose the heaven also to be in place, because it is in constant movement.’ (*Phy.*, Δ , 4, 210a???)
- v. All places admit of the distinction of up and down and each of the bodies is naturally carried to its appropriate place and rests there, and this makes the place either up or down.

We can add four other features to these from Aristotle’s other points:

- vi. ‘Place is something distinct from bodies.’ (*Phy.*, Δ , 1)
- vii. ‘Every sensible body is in place.’ (*Phy.*, Δ , 1)
- viii. Place is not an element: ‘What in the world then are we to suppose place to be? If it has the sort of nature described, it cannot be an element or composed of elements, whether these be corporeal or incorporeal: for while it has size, it has no body.’ (*Phy.*, Δ , 1)

¹ Abbreviations used in this paper:

Phy.

Physics

ix. Place is not a state of the thing. (Phy., Δ, 2)

2) *Four alternatives for place*

Aristotle mentions four alternatives for what place can be (Phy., Δ, 4, 212a2-7): i) form of the thing; ii) matter of the thing; iii) an extension of the thing which is always there (different from and over and above the extension of the thing which is displaced) and iv) the boundary of the continuing body at which it is in contact with the contained body.

In *Physics*, Δ, 2, 209 Aristotle argues that ‘if place is what primarily contains each body, it would be a limit’ and, thus, either the form or the matter of the thing. If we regard it as the limit of the body, the place will be the form but if we regard it as the extension of the magnitude, it is the matter.

Aristotle believes that Plato regarded place as matter because he says matter and space are the same and he did identify place and space.² (Phy., Δ, 2) Aristotle asserts, it seems without sufficient argument, that neither of the alternatives but the fourth one can be place: ‘Place necessarily is ... the boundary of the containing body at which it is in contact with the contained body.’ (Phy., Δ, 4, 212a3-5) He immediately defines the ‘contained body’ as ‘what can be moved by way of locomotion.’ (Phy., Δ, 4, 212a5-7) Therefore, he defines place as such: ‘The innermost motionless boundary of what contains (τὸ τοῦ περιέχοντος περὶ ἀκίνητον πρῶτον) is place.’ (Phy., Δ, 4, 212a20-21)

One consequence of this definition is that ‘place is coincident with the thing because boundaries are coincident with the bounded.’ (Phy., Δ, 4, 212a29-30)

² Plato could not, however, believe in the relation of place and form because, Aristotle says, he believed that the form and the number are not in place. (Phy., Δ, 2)