No work by any other philosopher is cited more often in the De caelo than Plato’s Timaeus.¹ The preponderance of references to his teacher’s dialogue on cosmology should come as no surprise: as the foundational work in teleological cosmology, the Timaeus is the natural reference point for the kind of natural philosophy Aristotle seeks to develop. Yet, as often in Greek philosophy, debt is the mother of polemic and Aristotle’s overt treatment of Plato in the De caelo is predominantly negative. I shall not here attempt full coverage of all aspects of the De caelo’s engagement with Platonic cosmology.² Such a project would require a more comprehensive and detailed reading of the De caelo than a single chapter allows. Instead, I shall characterize the relationship between the cosmologies of the De caelo and the Timaeus by first comparing the general scopes and subject matters of the two works, and, then, by focusing on a particular point of comparison, namely, the apparent absence in the De caelo of the world soul, which was one of the most important features of Plato’s cosmology.

¹ Explicit references include: De caelo 280a30, 293b32, 300a1, 300b17, 306b19, 308b4. However, the explicit references to the Timaeus are only the tip of the iceberg: often the reference to the Timaeus is simply assumed: see, for example, 299a6 ff. (on the geometrical construction of solids in Tim. 53c4–56c7) and 305b31–306b2 (on the mutual transformation of bodies by their resolution into planes discussed in Tim. 56c8–57c6).

² While one might sympathize with the ambition of Claghorn (1954) to overcome the polarization of Aristotle and the Timaeus, too many of his assimilations fail to represent either philosopher. For comparisons between the Timaeus and the De caelo, the reader is better advised to consult Solmsen (1960).
2. The scope of the De caelo

The topic of the *De caelo* is the heavens or in Greek οὐρανός. There is no need to think that the Greek title Περὶ οὐρανοῦ was used by Aristotle himself. Nonetheless, the title reflects Aristotle's own description of the subject matter as “heaven” in *De caelo* 1.9, 278b11. In characteristic fashion, however, he points to three different senses of the word:

First, however, we must explain what we mean by “heaven” and in how many ways we use the word in order to make clearer the object of our inquiry. In one sense, then, we call “heaven” the substance of the extreme circumference of the whole, or that natural body whose place is at the extreme circumference. We recognize habitually a special right to the name “heaven” in the extremity or upper region, which we take to be the seat of all that is divine. In another sense, we use this name for the body continuous with the extreme circumference, which contains the Moon, the Sun, and some of the stars; these we say are “in the heavens”. In yet another sense we give the name to all body included within the extreme circumference, since we habitually call the whole or totality “the heavens”. The word, then, is used in three senses.

(De caelo 278b9–21)

Is there one of these three senses in which Aristotle primarily meant to discuss heaven in the *De caelo*? The question exercised the ancient commentators considerably in their attempt to identify the unitary theme (σκιήδος) of the work. The disagreement that arose between Simplicius and Alexander on this question has immediate bearing on the relationship of the *De caelo* to the *Timaeus*.

According to Simplicius, Alexander took the subject matter of the *De caelo* to be the οὐρανός in its third sense, that is to say, the whole world or cosmos. But if so, Simplicius suggests, its subject matter would be the same as that of the *Timaeus*, where Plato (27b2–3) refers to “the whole heaven, or the world (κόσμος) or whatever else it might care to be called.” Yet, as Simplicius points out,

Aristotle clearly does not explain the world in this treatise as Plato did in the *Timaeus*, where he treated both of the principles of natural objects, matter and form, motion and time, and of the general composition of the world, and gave a particular account both of the heavenly bodies and

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3 Cf. Allan’s note:

*Titulus Περὶ Οὐρανοῦ nusquam apud ipsum reperitur; titulum de Caelo et Mundo ab Arabicis exemplaribus translatum crediderim; nusquam enim in codicibus Graecis kai κόσμου adiectum videmus.* (Allan 1955, iii).

4 Unless otherwise indicated, all translations of Aristotle are from Barnes (1985).

5 See the introduction to Hankinson (2002).