

# Uptake of Form and the Nature of Colours

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In *De Anima* II.12, Aristotle says that “...the sense (*aisthēsis*) is that which can receive perceptible forms without their matter, as wax receives the imprint of the ring without the iron or gold, and it takes the imprint which is of gold or bronze, but not *qua* gold or bronze.” This reception of the sensible form (e.g. the colour, the sound) by the animal is an alteration of the animal (*alloiōsis*) (*De An.*, II.5, 416b34). In what does this alteration consist? It is on that question (which, for reasons laid out above, is quite tangential to Aristotle’s main interest in *De Anima*) that an influential debate of interpreters has focussed:

- According to the ‘literalist’ interpretation of Aristotle (Slakey (1961), Sorabji (1974, 1992), Everson (1997)), “when a sense organ is activated and perception occurs, the organ is altered so that it literally becomes like its (proper) object: it takes on the property of the sensible which affects it” (Everson 1997: 10). The material alteration of the body by perception is either identical with (Slakey 1961: 481) or constitutes (Sorabji 1974: 55) the perceptual activity.
- According to the ‘spiritualist’ interpretation (Burnyeat 1992: 21), the change is a “becoming aware of some sensible quality in the environment”. Shields (2015: 50) says that the sense organ will symbolize sensible qualities in one way or another.

But what does this mean? *How* does the eye do its symbolising?<sup>1</sup>

Contrary to Perler (2002: 13), this is not primarily the question whether perception is an at least partly physiological or entirely immaterial transmission of form. Neither do I think that it is helpful to contrast the literal with the ‘representational’ becoming red of the sense organ (Shields 2015: 48): the choice is between two types of representation: by exemplification, or by some other, less direct, means.

I also think that it is beside the point to point out that exemplification is not *sufficient* for representation (Shields 2015: 49): of course it is not, only exemplifications of red in some kind *linked to* others represent something as being red. The question rather is: in virtue of what does the perceiving animal, or its eye(s), represent the apple as red? Aristotle’s answer is: because of the nature of redness, and the eye’s nature of being receptive to it.

The proper sensibles are specific to each sense and are, *by that sense*, always perceived veridically and *kath’hauto*; they determine, but are not determined by their sense, the essence of which is “naturally relative to them” (*De An.*, II.6, 418a24). While perception and the perceptible are correlatives (*Cat.* 7), the relation is not symmetric, but directed *from* the perceptible objects *to* the perception, because the former, but not the latter, could exist in the absence of the other one (*Cat.* 8a6-9): the perceptible objects themselves are the agents of perception (*Met.*, Γ. 5, 1010b35-1011a2), and the capacity they actualise when they act upon perceivers is grounded in non-dispositional properties: “the proper sensibles will bring about perception in virtue of being what they are: they are intrinsically such as to produce the relevant changes in the organs” (Everson 1997: 29).

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1. The circularity of Burnyeat’s ‘spiritualist’ account becomes apparent when he says (*italics mine*): “...receiving the warmth of a warm thing without its matter means becoming warm without really becoming warm; it means registering, noticing, or *perceiving* the warmth without really becoming warm” (1992: 24)

To posteriority of the senses to their *kath'hauta* objects, the proper sensibles, does not make the latter in any way 'internal' to or 'subsist in' the former.<sup>2</sup> It rather constrains their material constitution:

The organ [of sight] needs to be transparent because [...] it is the transparent which, because it is colourless, is receptive of colour [...]. Coloured substances and transparent substances thus stand as agents and patients *kath'hauta*: it is the nature of colour to produce change in what is transparent – just as it is in the nature of what is transparent to be affected by colour. (Everson 1997: 80)

The proper sensibles are thus *kath'hauto* causes of a change in a perceiving body – a change which is the perception. In all types of perception, the medium is that of a transmission of form. It is a form that is taken on in the alteration of the sense that is the perception. This is put in terms of “things in so far as they are of a certain kind” in the continuation of the passage quoted above:

...the sense (*aisthēsis*) is that which can receive perceptible forms without their matter, as wax receives the imprint of the ring without the iron or gold, and it takes the imprint which is of gold or bronze, but not *qua* gold or bronze. Similarly too in each case the sense is affected by that which has colour or flavour or sound, but by these not in so far as they are what each of them is spoken of as being, but in so far as they are things of a certain kind and in accordance with their principle. (*De An.*, II.12, 424a17)

In the visual perception of a red surface, e.g., the eye is the matter, and redness its form. Redness, however, as the proper sensible of sight, is an external object, and a particular (*De An.*, II.5, 417b16). It is “capable of setting in motion that which is actually transparent, and this is its nature” (*De An.*, II.7, 418a26). That only the form, but not the matter of the red object is received, makes it a form of perception; plants, which do not perceive, lack this differential ability because they do not have sense-organs and thus no senses.

Of the nature of (some particular) redness, a proper sensible of sight, we are, I think, given the following picture: it is a form of an external object, which exists prior to and independently of our perceiving it. Because it is capable of setting air, which is a medium of sight, into motion, it may be received by a sense, ie. sight, the nature of which it is to be receptive to it, ie. potentially red. When the red object is perceived, it shares its form with the eye – the sense (sight) is affected by the essence of the proper sensible, while the sense-organ is affected in the sense of being of a certain extended magnitude. The sense-organ (eye) and the sense (sight) are “the same, although what it is for them to be such is not the same” (*De An.*, II.12, 424a17): sight is a potentiality of the eye, its function and essence; it is sight that becomes red, i.e. is affected only by the form (of the red object), while the eye, which is affected in a different way, is in relation not just to the form, but also the matter of the red object. –<sup>3</sup>

So redness is a way for sight to be!

Burnyeat (1992) thinks that the Aristotelian theory of perception needs not to be taken seriously because it presupposes something like perspectival facts:

One might say that the physical material of animal bodies in Aristotle's world is already pregnant with consciousness, needing only to be awakened to red or warmth. (1992: 19)

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2. (Everson 1997: 31–32) argues against Hamlyn (cf. his comments on p. 105 of Aristotle (1968–1969)) and Sorabji (1971: 81) that the dependence of the sense on its objects is not definitional, logical or grammatical, but causal. This also defuses the worry that Aristotle's priority claim is implausible for the case of touch, the objects of the latter to be too varied to define the sense of touch (Hamlyn (1968–1969: 105–106) and Sorabji (1971: 81)).

3. This interpretation makes best sense of the otherwise quite enigmatic beginning of II.12, of which I have not been able to find a convincing interpretation. Hamlyn's use of scare quotes is telling: “Aristotle goes on to ‘explain’ the reception of form in terms of the affection of a sense by things in virtue of their form, i.e. in perception the sense is affected by an object just in so far as it is of the relevant form and not because it is what it is.” (Aristotle 1968–1969: 113, ad 424a17)

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