

# Aristoteles

Seminar ‘Das Problem der Wahrnehmung’, Philipp Blum

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## Aristotle’s *De Anima*

Psychology is part of biology because all affections of the soul (*psychē*) involve the body. Aristotle may be characterised as a physicalist using a much broader notion of ‘physical’ as is customary today (cf. Burnyeat (1992: 26)). Perception, for Aristotle, is a natural phenomenon and as such does not require an explanation: “An eye does not see in virtue of undergoing any other change – rather it sees just because its capacity for vision is activated by an object of vision.” (Everston 1997: 6)

The *psychē* is the “form of the living body” and thus the essence of every plant, animal and human: having a *psychē* is being alive (413a21-2). Its capacities are nutrition, perception, *phantasia* and thought. Perception distinguishes animals from plants; they need it, in particular touch, the sense of food, because they have to move for food or, if stationary, will not feed unless triggered by the perception of food (Everston 1997: 14).

**II.5.** Perception (*aisthēsis*) is an alteration of the perceiving object, the effect of being affected by an external object, which is actually so as the perceiving object, before being affected by it, is potentially.

**II.6.** The objects of perception are either perceived in virtue of themselves (*kath’hauta*) or accidentally (*kata sumbebekos*). Among the first are the proper sensibles (“that which cannot be perceived by any other sense”, colour of sight, sound of hearing, flavour of taste, that to which “the essence of each sense is naturally relative”) and the common sensibles (movement, rest, number, figure, magnitude). The second are accidents of the thing which one perceives and which is the object of perception as such: in this second sense, not only the white thing, but also the son of Darius may be called “object of my perception” (DA II.6, 418a7-25), the colour and the accidental sensible (Darius) forming an “accidental unity” (ie. white Darius). The perceptions of proper sensibles are almost always true, in the sense that the sense proper to the sensible is not deceived, though some belief based on the true perception may still be false (Everston 1997: 19):

Aristotle’s claim that we cannot be deceived in our perception of the proper sensibles is not the weak claim that our beliefs about our own experience are incorrigible but the strong claim that, in respect of the proper sensibles, our senses guarantee a truthful report of our perceptual environment. (Everston 1997: 20)

**II.7.** The essence of each sense, which is a capacity, is “naturally relative” to its objects, the proper sensibles of this sense, which (may) exist before the sense in question exists (*Cat.* 8a6-9), for “perception is hardly of itself – but there must be something else beyond the perception, and this must be prior to the perception; since what brings about change is naturally prior to what is changed, even if they are spoken of in relation to each other” (*Met.* Γ. 5, 1010b35-1011a2). Sight is thus posterior to its proper sensibles, colours and ‘shininess’ (to produce perception in the dark) – categorical properties which ground the disposition of things to be seen and are thus the ‘agents’ of perception. By its nature, a colour sets into motion that which is transparent, which then becomes light.

**II.8.** Like sight, audition is a relation between two things through a medium: “actual sound is always of something in relation to something and in something”. Because sound is a movement of air, the difference between movements and densities of quantities of air explains why there are different sounds.

**II.9.** In humans, smell is less developed and dependent on valence: man “perceives non of the objects of smell unless they are painful or pleasant”. Contrary to other animals, humans cannot smell without inhaling.

**II.10.** “The object of taste is a form of the tangible”, and taste is a form of touch. Tasting is touching flavours, which are forms of something moist.

**II.11.** The proper sensibles of touch are multidimensional, and its medium (the water, air, flesh or membrane wrapped around our body) is touched too.

**II.12.** "...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." The sense and the sense-organ are the same, though have different 'ways of being'.

## Questions

How plausible is Aristotle's demarcation of proper sensibles? Don't we see other things than colours and shininess, as e.g. "size and shape, motion or rest, texture, depth, or the location of things" Sorabji (1979a: 80)? Yes, Aristotle would say, we do see them, but not *kath'hauto*, but instead by seeing colours (or shininess).

How plausible is Aristotle's claim that the senses are posterior to their objects? (Everston 1997: 31–32) argues against Hamlyn (cf. his comments on p. 105 of Aristotle (1968)) and Sorabji (1979a: 81) that the dependence of the sense on its objects is not definitional, logical or grammatical, but causal.

According to the 'literalist' interpretation of Aristotle (Slakey (1961), Sorabji (1979b, 1992), Everston (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" (Everston 1997: 10). Perception thus is a kind of alteration (*alloiōsis*) (DA II.5.4, 416b34). This material alteration of the body is either identical with (Slakey 1961: 481) or constitutes (Sorabji 1979b: 55) the perceptual activity.

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)

## The emergence of content with the Stoics

Diogenes Laertius: "Perception (*aisthēsis*) is said by the Stoics to be (1) (the *pneuma* extending to the senses (*aisthēseis*), (2) the apprehension through them, (3) the makeup of the sense organs, in which some people are defective." (7.52) The crucial new ingredient is the distinction between appearance (*phantasia*) and assent (*sunkatathesis*): "Of appearances, some are rational and some nonrational: rational are those of rational animals, nonrational, of animals that are nonrational. The rational ones are thoughts, the nonrational have no name." (D.L. 7.51) Annas characterises the difference as one of conceptualisation: "Perceiving is thinking, not the reception of raw data. Perceiving and thinking are not separate faculties; for humans there is no way of taking in information about the world that does not involve thinking." (1992: 75)

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