

# Die Ideentheorie

Seminar ‘Das Problem der Wahrnehmung’, Philipp Blum

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## Aristotle again: Representation by exemplification or by signification

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*) (DA II.5.4, 416b34). In what does it consist?

- According to the ‘literalist’ interpretation of Aristotle (Slakey (1961), Sorabji (1979b, 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 1979b: 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 (2010: 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 with literal with the ‘representational’ becoming red of the sense organ (Shields 2010: 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 2010: 49): of course it is not, only exemplifications of red in some kind *linked to* others represent something as being red.<sup>2</sup> 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’. 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.*, 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).

<sup>1</sup>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)

<sup>2</sup>It is also beside the point to support the non-sufficiency claim by attentional phenomena: “That [literal alteration is sufficient for perception] seems an odd and unsustainable claim, since, for example, my flesh can become warm without my perceiving warmth; indeed, the view thus interpreted seems to entail that I perceive every sensible quality in whose presence I find myself, with no allowance for the phenomena of selective attention, inattention, distraction, and the like.” (Shields 2010: 49) Attention is a passive faculty: it presupposes some content already independently available.

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>3</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 medieval problem: intentionality

The medievals both broadened and focussed the problem, extending it to thoughts, linguistic signs and even (the contents of) the knowledge of God, but also concentrated largely on the change in the perceiver rather than its efficient cause.

Perler (2002: 12–23) speaks of a confluence of the following traditions, which all came to center on “intentio”:

- The interpretation of the *De Anima* claim that perception of *X* is the taking in of the form of *X* without its matter. Albert the Great claims that the form (ie. a colour, a sound) is taken in not in its 'material being' (*esse materiale*), but in its 'spiritual being' (*esse spirituale*), or rather just its *intentio*, which, with Aquinas, became the claim that the form has 'intentional being' in the soul.
- The interpretation of the *De Interpretatione* claim that spoken and written words are signs for 'impressions in the soul' (*passiones animae*), which are themselves representations of external things, identified with the 'words in the heart' (*verba in corde*) that Augustine had claimed to be prior to spoken or written words, and which were – via the arabic translations of al-Farabi - translated as 'intentiones'.
- The interpretation of the 'perspectivalist' tradition of optics, which explains visual perception by the transportation, normally through air, of so-called 'species in medio', which Roger Bacon claimed to be 'intentiones' of the thing itself which have 'weaker being'.
- The interpretation of Augustine's claim that God foreknows in virtue of having eternal ideas which (only) have an 'intelligible' or 'intentional' mode of being.

The species theory, most clearly in Aquinas, sides with the 'spiritualist' interpretation of Aristotle:

Est autem duplex immutatio: una naturalis, et alia spiritualis. Naturalis quidem, secundum quod forma immutantis recipitur in immutato secundum esse natural, sicut calor in calefacto. Spiritualis autem, secundum quod forma immutantis recipitur in immutato secundum esse spirituale; ut forma coloris in pupilla, qua not fit per hoc colorata. Ad operationem autem sensus requiritur immutatio spiritualis, per quam intentio formae sensibilis fiat in organo sensus. Alioquin, si sola immutatio naturalis sufficeret ad sentiendum, omnia corpora naturalia sentirent dum alterantur. (*ST*, I, q. 78, art. 3, corp.)

Es gibt aber eine zweifache Veränderung: eine natürliche und eine geistige. Eine *natürliche* erfolgt, wenn die Form des Verändernden mit einem natürlichen Sein im Veränderten aufgenommen wird, so wie die Hitze im Erhitzten aufgenommen wird. Eine *geistige* aber erfolgt, wenn die Form des Verändernden mit einem geistigen Sein im Veränderten aufgenommen wird, so wie die Form der Farbe in der Pupille aufgenommen wird, die ja dadurch nicht gefärbt wird. Für die Tätigkeit des Wahrnehmungssinns ist aber eine geistige Veränderung erforderlich, durch die eine Intention der wahrnehmbaren Form im Wahrnehmungsorgan entsteht. Andernfalls, wenn eine natürliche Veränderung allein zum Wahrnehmen genügte, würden alle natürlichen Körper wahrnehmen, solange sie verändert werden. (translation by Perler (2002: 43))

## The main theses

King (2007) distinguishes four theses about representationalism discussed in the Middle Ages:

<sup>3</sup>(Everson 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. 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: 105–106) and Sorabji (1979a: 81)).

1. Conformality: The mental representation and the represented have the same form.
2. Likeness: The mental representation resembles, or is a likeness, of the represented item.
3. Causal covariance: The mental representation is caused by the represented item.
4. Sign: The mental representation signifies the represented item.

To explain the non-symmetry of representation, conformality theory needs additional resources: the most promising such account – Aquinas’: that it’s the mode of the form’s presence that makes the difference – says that the form is present in the intellect ‘spiritually’ or ‘intellectually’, ie. without being the form of it – as it is present e.g. in the intervening air. Aquinas also bites the bullet to say that the air really ‘is perceptive of’ the colour.

Duns Scotus’ version of the conformality account holds that the form that is the thinking (an accident of the intellect) is not the same as the form that determines what the thinking is about (by conformality), but is directed at or includes the latter. The act/content distinction he thus introduces is between the ‘subjectively’ present (accident of) thinking and the ‘objectively’ present external form. But what is these *esse obiectivum* (or *esse representativum, esse deminutum*) forms of external things have when they are in our minds?

Likeness can either be taken literal or pictorial: in the first sense, it amounts to sameness of quality, and makes the soul literally coloured; in the second sense, it presupposes an account of representation by pictures: what aspects of the pictures are taken to represent aspects of the thing pictured? Introducing (primitive?) correspondence rules will not help:

When a transformation-rule is applied to some item, the result is, ideally, something with features that systematically correspond to properties of the original item. What is it that such transformation-rule preserves? Well, the natural answer is: *form*. (Nowadays, people say ‘structure’ but that’s an acceptable translation of *forma*.)” (King 2007: 92)

Ockham realised, however, that even isomorphism + conformity will not help with the singularity of representation: “Ockham’s point is that images, conscious or not, are by their nature applicable to many – that the correspondence-rules aren’t guaranteed to have unique inverses (i.e. the rules don’t in general yield one-to-one mappings).” (King 2007: 94)

The causal covariance account needs to be supplemented by the ‘sign’ account to provide determinate enough contents. Their combination yields a “mediaeval version of functionalism, the idea that determinate content is fully specified by inputs (covariance) and outputs (linguistic role)”, where this is taken to be their place in the general categories of a mental language. Once the mental language and its network is in place, there is no need for intelligible species any more: mental representation can just be the mental events themselves.

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