

On Aristotle on Perception
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by Christopher Shields

Aristotle claims that perception is best understood on the model of hylomorphic change generally: just as a house changes from blue to white when acted upon by the agency of a painter applying paint, so "perception comes about with <an organ's> being changed and affected ... for it seems to be a kind of alteration" (De Anima ii 5, 416b33–34). So in line with his general account of alteration, Aristotle treats perception as a case of interaction between two suitable agents: objects capable of acting and capacities capable of being affected. That the agents and patients must both be suitable is important, since we need to distinguish between two ways, e.g., an odor might affect something. By being placed in its vicinity, a clove of garlic might affect a block of tofu. The tofu might well come to take on the odor of the garlic. But we would not want to say that the tofu perceives the garlic. By contrast, when an animal is affected by the same clove, it perceives the odor. Since the garlic is the same in both cases, the difference in these cases must reside in the character of the object affected. When animals receive perceptual forms, perception results; when non-living entities are affected by what seem to be the same forms, only non-perceptual alteration occurs.

In both kinds of alterations, Aristotle is happy to speak of an affected thing as receiving the form of the agent which affects it and of the change consisting in the affected thing's "becoming like" the agent (De Anima ii 5, 418a3–6; ii 12, 424a17–21). So there is in both cases a hylomorphic model of alteration involving enforming, that is, a model according to which change is explained by the acquisition of a form by something capable of receiving it. Consequently, whatever is changed in a given way is necessarily such that it is capable of being changed in that way. This is not the mere triviality that whatever becomes actually F must already be possibly F. Instead, it is the recognition that specific forms of change require suitable capacities in the changing subjects, and that, consequently, analyses of specific forms of change will necessarily involve consideration of those capacities. No marshmallow can receive the form of an actual automobile; and only entities capable of perceiving can receive the perceptible forms of objects. This is Aristotle's meaning when he claims: "the perceptive faculty is in potentiality such as the object of perception already is in actuality" and that when something is affected by an object of perception, "it is made like it and is such as that thing is" (De Anima ii 5, 418a3–6).

This hylomorphic restriction on the suitability of subjects of change has the effect of limiting cases of actual perception to those instances of form-reception which involve living beings endowed with the appropriate faculties. It does not, however, explain just what those faculties are, nor even how they are "made like" their objects of perception. Minimally, though, Aristotle claims that for some subject S and some sense object O:

S perceives O if and only if:

- (i) S has the capacity requisite for receiving O's sensible form;
- (ii) O acts upon that capacity by enforming it; and, as a result,
- (iii) S's relevant capacity becomes isomorphic with that form.

Each of these clauses requires unpacking. The plausibility of Aristotle's theory turns on their eventual explications. The first clause (i) is intended to distinguish the active capacities of animals from the merely passive capacities of lifeless material bodies, including the media through which sensible forms travel. (Just as we do not want to say that the tofu in the refrigerator perceives the garlic next to it, we do not want to say that air perceives the color blue when affected by the color of a car.) But it does not yet specify what is required for having the requisite active capacities. Also difficult is the notion of isomorphism appealed to in (iii). As stated, (iii) invites, and has received, scrutiny. Interpretations range

from treating the form of isomorphism as direct and literal, so that, e.g., the eyes become speckled when viewing a robin's egg, to attenuated, where the isomorphism is more akin to that enjoyed between a house and its blue-print. Here especially the plausibility of Aristotle's hylomorphic analysis of perception hangs in the balance.

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<<http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/spr2015/entries/aristotle-psychology/>>.