

Aristotle on Perceptual Content

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§1. One necessarily perceives particulars, not universals

An. post. I 31, 87b29–30

ἀλλ' αἰσθάνεσθαι γε ἀναγκαῖον τόδε
 τι καὶ ποὺ καὶ νῦν.

One necessarily perceives a this in a particular place in the present.

An. post. I 31, 87b30–33

τὸ δὲ καθόλου καὶ ἐπὶ πᾶσιν
 ἀδύνατον αἰσθάνεσθαι· οὐ γὰρ τόδε
 οὐδὲ νῦν· οὐ γὰρ ἂν ἦν καθόλου·
 τὸ γὰρ αἰεὶ καὶ πανταχοῦ καθόλου
 φαμὲν εἶναι.

It is impossible to perceive what is universal and holds across all cases, since it is not a this or in the present. For that would not be universal. We call “universal” that which holds in every instance and on every occasion.

- (1) S perceives a particular.
- (2) S does not perceive a universal.

An. post. I 31, 87b37–9

αἰσθάνεσθαι μὲν γὰρ ἀνάγκη καθ'
 ἕκαστον, ἢ δ' ἐπιστήμη τῷ τὸ καθόλου
 γινώσκῃ ἐστιν.

For while one necessarily perceives a particular, knowledge occurs by apprehending the universal.

An. post. I 18, 81b5–7

... ἐπαχθῆναι δὲ μὴ ἔχοντας αἴσθησιν
 ἀδύνατον· τῶν γὰρ καθ' ἕκαστον ἢ
 αἴσθησις· οὐ γὰρ ἐνδέχεται λαβεῖν
 αὐτῶν τὴν ἐπιστήμην.

... [and if] it is impossible for those lacking perception to make generalizations, since perception is of particulars; for it is not possible for it to acquire knowledge of them.

- (3) S does not know a particular.
- (4) S knows a universal.

	particulars	universals
knows	—	✓
perceives	✓	—

§2. A purely extensional reading?

- (A) S perceives x .
- (P) x is perceptible *iff* x can be perceived.

These formulations are purely extensional: any coreferential expression can be substituted *salva veritate*.

§3. The need for generalizations over contents

Aristotle's theory makes generalizations over not only over perceptions, but over which perceptible types are perceived or not.

Perhaps a type is perceived just in case a token of that type is perceived:

F is perceptible *iff* some F can be perceived

- (P') F is perceptible *iff* it is possible that there is an x such that
 - i. x is perceived
 - ii. x is F .
- (A') S perceives an F *iff* there is an x such that
 - i. S perceives x
 - ii. x is F .

A particular's belonging to a type is extrinsic to its being perceived, and so expressed in a separate conjunct.

§4. *Perception is selective*

Is this notion of what can be perceived too permissive? *Any true* description of the object can be used in a perceptual report.

Or is Aristotle's notion of extrinsic perceptibles perhaps that permissive? *E.g.*, seeing a sample of bile; the son of Diares; or even a universal:

Metaph. M 10, 1087a19–20

ἀλλὰ κατὰ συμβεβηκὸς ἢ ὄψις τὸ καθόλου χρώμα ὄρα ὅτι τὸδε τὸ χρώμα ὃ ὄρα χρώμά ἐστιν. But sight sees the universal, color, extrinsically because the particular color that it sees is a color.

Even if perceptual reports are permissive, theoretical claims are not:

- (a) I see something yellow intrinsically.
- (b) I see something bitter extrinsically.
- (a') I see something bitter intrinsically.
- (b') I see something yellow extrinsically.

Perhaps these distinctions can be tracked by causal differences:

- (A_I) S intrinsically perceives an *F* with a sense modality *M* iff there is an *x* such that
 - i. S perceives *x* with *M*
 - ii. *x* is *F*
 - iii. *x* is an efficient cause of (*i*) in so far as *x* is *F*.
- (A_E) S extrinsically perceives an *F* with some sense modality *M* iff there is an *x* such that
 - i. S perceives *x* with *M*
 - ii. *x* is *F*
 - iii. *x* is an efficient cause of (*i*), not in so far as *x* is *F*, but in so far as it is *G* (for some *G*).

S. Everson, *Aristotle on Perception* (Oxford 1997), 192

$\forall x \forall s (x \text{ is perceived accidentally by } s \leftrightarrow x \text{ is an accidental cause of } s\text{'s perceiving some proper sensible})$

§5. *Perception is prone to error*

But this is too strict a notion of what can be perceived. *Only true* descriptions of the object can be used in a true perceptual report.

But misperception is possible. Perceptions themselves *can be false*:

De an. III 3, 428a12–15

ἔτι οὐδὲ λέγομεν, ὅταν ἐνεργῶμεν ἀκριβῶς περὶ τὸ αἰσθητόν, ὅτι φαίνεται τοῦτο ἡμῖν ἀνθρωπος, ἀλλὰ μᾶλλον ὅταν μὴ ἐναργῶς αἰσθανώμεθα τότε καὶ ἡ ἀληθῆς καὶ ἡ ψευδής.

Again, we do not say that that this appears to be a human to us when we are making accurate use of [our senses] regarding the perceptible, but rather when we are not perceiving clearly; and in that case there is both true perception and false perception.

De an. III 3, 428b18–429a2

ἡ αἴσθησις τῶν μὲν ἰδίων ἀληθῆς ἐστὶν ἢ ὅτι ὀλίγιστον ἔχουσα τὸ ψεῦδος. δεύτερον δὲ τοῦ ᾧ συμβέβηκε ταῦτα καὶ ἐνταῦθα ἤδη ἐνδέχεται διαψεύδεσθαι ὅτι μὲν γὰρ λευκόν, οὐ ψεύδεται, εἰ δὲ τοῦτο τὸ λευκόν ἢ ἄλλο, ψεύδεται. τρίτον δὲ τῶν κοινῶν καὶ ἐπομένων τοῖς συμβεβηκόσιν, οἷς ὑπάρχει τὰ ἴδια λέγω δ' οἷον κίνησις καὶ μέγεθος (ἃ συμβέβηκε τοῖς αἰσθητοῖς), περὶ ἃ μάλιστα ἤδη ἐστὶν ἀπατηθῆναι κατὰ τὴν αἴσθησιν. ἢ δὲ κίνησις ἢ ὑπὸ τῆς ἐνεργείας τῆς αἰσθήσεως γυνομένη διοίσει ἢ ἀπὸ τούτων τῶν τριῶν αἰσθήσεων. καὶ ἡ μὲν πρώτη παρούσης τῆς αἰσθήσεως ἀληθῆς, αἰ δ' ἕτεραι καὶ παρούσης καὶ ἀπούσης εἶεν ἂν ψευδεῖς, καὶ μάλιστα ὅταν πόρρω τὸ αἰσθητόν ᾖ. εἰ οὖν μηθὲν ἄλλο ἔχει τὰ εἰρημένα ἢ φαντασία, τοῦτο δ' ἐστὶ τὸ λεχθέν, ἢ φαντασία ἂν εἴη κίνησις ὑπὸ τῆς αἰσθήσεως τῆς κατ' ἐνέργειαν γυνομένη.

The perception of exclusive [perceptibles] is true or has falsehood to the least possible extent. Second is [the perception] of that to which these belong. At this point already it is possible to be in error. For [the perception] that it is white is not wrong; it is wrong about whether what is white is this or something else. Third is [the perception] of shared features which are consequent upon these extrinsic characteristics, to which the exclusive [perceptibles] belong. I mean, for example, motion and size, which belong to perceptibles, about which there is the greatest deception perceptually. The change which is produced by the activity of perception differs for each of these three perceptions. The first is true when perception is present, but the others can be false both when the perception is present and when it is absent, and especially whenever the perceptible is far away. If representation is nothing else other than what has just been mentioned, and this is as has been described, then representation will be a change produced by actual perceiving.

Insomn. I, 458b31–3

τὸ γὰρ παρορᾶν καὶ παρακούειν ὁρῶντος ἀληθές τι καὶ ἀκούοντος, οὐ μέντοι τοῦτο ὁ οἶεται.

Misseeing and mishearing are what occurs to someone who sees or hears something real, though not what he takes this [to be].

§6. *Perception is de re*

In any perception, there must (i) always be some real object that is perceived and (ii) something we perceive it *as* (whether correctly or not):

(A*) S perceives *x* as *F*.

The ‘*x*’ place is fully extensional, the ‘as *F*’ locution nonextensional.

An. post. I 31, 87b28–9

ἔστιν ἡ αἴσθησις τοῦ τοιοῦδε καὶ μὴ τοῦδέ τινος.

Perception is of the such, and not of some this.

(1′) S’s perception is not of a particular.

(2′) S’s perception is of a universal.

(1) S perceives a particular.

(2) S does not perceive a universal.

An. post. I 31, 87b28–35

οὐδὲ δι’ αἰσθήσεως ἔστιν ἐπίστασθαι. εἰ γὰρ καὶ ἔστιν ἡ αἴσθησις τοῦ τοιοῦδε καὶ μὴ τοῦδέ τινος, ἀλλ’ αἰσθάνεσθαι γε ἀναγκαῖον τόδε τι καὶ ποῦ καὶ νῦν. τὸ δὲ καθόλου καὶ ἐπὶ πάσῃ ἀδύνατον αἰσθάνεσθαι οὐ γὰρ τόδε οὐδὲ νῦν· οὐ γὰρ ἂν ἦν καθόλου· τὸ γὰρ αἰεὶ καὶ πανταχοῦ καθόλου φαμέν εἶναι. ἐπεὶ οὖν αἰ μὲν ἀποδείξεις καθόλου, ταῦτα δ’ οὐκ ἔστιν αἰσθάνεσθαι, φανερόν ὅτι οὐδ’ ἐπίστασθαι δι’ αἰσθήσεως ἔστιν.

It is not possible at all to know through perception. For even though perception is of the such, and not of some this, one necessarily perceives a this at a certain place in the present. It is impossible to perceive what is universal and holds across all cases, since it is not a this or in the present. For those would not be universal. We call “universal” that which holds in every instance and on every occasion. Since, then, demonstrations are universal, and it is not possible to perceive the latter, it is clear that it is not possible at all to know through perception.

An. post. II 19, 100a16–b1

καὶ γὰρ αἰσθάνεται μὲν τὸ καθ’ ἕκαστον, ἢ δ’ αἴσθησις τοῦ καθόλου ἔστιν, οἷον ἀνθρώπου, ἀλλ’ οὐ Καλλίου ἀνθρώπου.

For in fact, although one perceives the particular, perception is of the universal—of human, say, and not of Callias, a human.

§7. *Perception can be nonconceptual*

(c) Necessarily, if a subject *S* perceives some *x* as *F*, then at that time *S* possesses the concept of *F*.

(c*) Necessarily, if a subject *S* acquires the concept of *F*, then at some earlier time *S* perceives some *x* as *F*.

(NC) It is possible that a subject *S* perceives some *x* as *F* at a time when *S* does not possess the concept of *F*.

§8. *What can be perceived*

(A*) S perceives *x* as *F*.

As a first approximation,

F is perceptible *iff* it is possible that there is an *S* and an *x* such that *S* perceives *x* as *F*.

Aristotle can accept this, but would want something stronger:

(p*) *F* is perceptible *iff* it is possible that there is an *S* and an *x* such that

i. S perceives *x* as *F*

ii. *x* is *F*

iii. *x* is an efficient cause of (i).

(p*₁) *F* is intrinsically perceptible with a sense modality *M* *iff* it is possible that there is an *S* and an *x* such that

i. S perceives *x* as *F* with *M*

ii. *x* is *F*

iii. *x* is an efficient cause of (i) in so far as *x* is *F*.

(P_E^{*}) *F* is extrinsically perceptible with a sense modality *M* iff

- i.* *F* is perceptible
- ii.* *F* is *not* intrinsically perceptible with *M*.

We can then classify the different kinds of perception in terms of the type of perceptible the object is perceived as having, whether or not it actually exemplifies it:

(A_I^{*}) *S* intrinsically perceives an *F* with a sense modality *M* iff there is an *x* such that

- i.* *S* perceives *x* as *F* with *M*
- ii.* *x* is an efficient cause of (*i*)
- iii.* *F* is intrinsically perceptible with *M*.

(A_E^{*}) *S* extrinsically perceives an *F* with a sense modality *M* iff there is an *x* such that

- i.* *S* perceives *x* as *F* with *M*
- ii.* *x* is an efficient cause of (*i*)
- iii.* *F* is extrinsically perceptible with *M*.