

Pavel Gregorić, *Aristotle on the Common Sense*
Clarendon Press, Oxford, 2007
(x + 252 pp., ISBN: 978-0-19-927737-7 [hb])

Pavel Gregorić's learned and illuminating monograph deals with two rather loosely connected topics, on the one hand the question of what to make of Aristotle's use of the expression 'common sense' (κοινή αἴσθησις), and on the other hand Aristotle's conception of something that in the later Aristotelian tradition, but never in Aristotle himself, gets referred to as the common sense, namely a system of abilities that depend on the unity of the capacity for perception, such as the ability to perceive a rose as red and at the same time as fragrant, or the ability to perceive that one is both hearing and seeing.

In discussing the first of these topics, Gregorić surveys and interprets the five or six passages in which Aristotle uses the expression 'common sense', offering information and clarification from which all students of Aristotle's theory of perception stand to benefit. Gregorić's discussion of the second topic rests on synoptic and painstakingly detailed exegesis of four key passages, the first two of which (*De Sensu* 7, and *De Anima* III.2 426^b8–427^a16, discussed respectively in Chapters 1 and 2 of Part III) have received very little attention in modern scholarship. Even where Gregorić's proposals do not carry conviction, he deserves gratitude for his valiant and energetic attempt to extract a coherent bit of philosophical theory from some rather obscure texts. Throughout the book, Gregorić shows himself to be thoughtfully sensitive to Aristotle's Platonic background, as well as to apparent points of contact between the Aristotelian ideas on which he focuses and issues in contemporary philosophy of mind. The writing is always clear and engaging.

The center-piece of Gregorić's discussion of Aristotle's own use of the expression 'common sense' is a persuasive and nicely deflationary reading of an argument in *De Anima* III.1 for thinking that there is no such thing as a special sense for the so-called common perceptibles, such as change, rest, shape, magnitude, number, and unity. Rather, Aristotle holds that we perceive such things by making use of a perceptual power that is shared either by all the senses or at least by some of them, in that each of the senses in question incorporates sensitivity to the relevant perceptible features. On this view,

Aristotle is not using the expression ‘common sense’ to denote a perceptual capacity over and above the five senses, by exercising which we perceive the common perceptibles. Rather, he is using the expression, quite naturally, to introduce the idea of a form of perceptual sensitivity that is built into, and shared among, the perceptual capacities that have already been introduced by the time we come to *DA* III.1, namely the five senses. One upshot of this is that Aristotle conceives of the five senses as individually sufficient for perceiving common perceptibles: on this view, I really can see the motion of the cars passing by outside my office, and you really can feel the shape of the journal in front of you. This is an attractive result, given that it accords with what we ordinarily think we can learn just by relying on our familiar five senses. Aristotle is cast as the philosophical hero who corrects Plato’s misstep, in *Theaetetus* 184–186, of artificially impoverishing the senses so that sight, for instance, does not enable you to perceive shapes or movements, let alone such things as cars or journals, but only colours.

One problem that remains, though, is this. Here is how Aristotle begins the argument:

Nor again can there be a special sense-organ for the common perceptibles, which we perceive by each sense incidentally—e.g. change, rest, shape, magnitude, number, one...

De Anima III.1 425^a14–16

As Gregorić points out, the claim that we perceive the common perceptibles by each sense incidentally (κατὰ συμβεβηκός) appears to contradict the doctrine of *DA* II.6, that the common perceptibles are perceived ‘in themselves’ (καθ’ αὐτά), as opposed to being perceived incidentally (418^a8–9). What to make of this? Gregorić considers several proposals that have been offered by commentators, and settles for what he takes to be ‘the least problematic solution’ (p. 71), which is to suppose that the relative clause is meant to be counterfactual, presenting the situation that would obtain if there were a special sense-organ, and a special sense, for the common perceptibles. But Hicks (ad loc.) and others were right to be dissatisfied with that solution. The only reason to think that Aristotle is not stating what he takes to be a fact is the appearance of a contradiction with what is said about the common perceptibles in *DA* II.6, and this turns out to be a mere appearance: surely Aristotle can consistently hold that the common perceptibles are *perceived* in themselves, not incidentally, and that they are perceived *by each sense* incidentally.

Aristotle's thought is presumably that it is a form of perceptual sensitivity that is common to the senses that accounts for non-incidental perception of the common perceptibles. Even when I see the motion of the cars outside my office, Aristotle will hold that I perceive that motion by sight not in so far as it is sight, but in so far as it incorporates a form of perceptual sensitivity that it shares with the other senses.¹ For Aristotle, this is quite compatible with thinking, as Gregorić does, that this form of perceptual sensitivity is partly constitutive of the sense of sight. The case might be parallel to the way isosceles triangles have angles equal to two right angles not in so far as they are isosceles but in so far as they are triangles, even though being a triangle is partly constitutive of being an isosceles triangle.

In discussing Aristotle's conception of the unified perceptual capacity that is composed of the senses, Gregorić argues for assigning four distinct functions to that capacity,² namely simultaneous perception (pp. 129–144), perceptual discrimination (or, better, perceptual discernment, namely of one perceptible from another: pp. 145–162), control of the senses (pp. 163–173), and monitoring of the senses (pp. 174–192).

So far as simultaneous perception is concerned, he ends up ascribing a position to Aristotle that he acknowledges is in some ways seriously unsatisfactory. One of the ways it is unsatisfactory is that it denies the possibility of what seems to be an extremely common experience, namely perceiving by any one of the senses more than one of the relevant special perceptibles at once—for example, simultaneously seeing more colours than one. Aristotle does, according to Gregorić, allow that one can simultaneously perceive more colours than one, but he insists that such simultaneous perception of special perceptibles falling under a single sense is not an operation of the sense in question, but rather of the perceptual capacity as a whole. Now this is a bizarre idea. Try telling someone, as they look at a landscape or a painting, that one thing they cannot do is see any number

¹ Something along these lines is also suggested by Stephen Everson, *Aristotle on Perception* (Oxford University Press, 1997), 156–157. Gregorić is mistaken to include Everson in a list of scholars who take Aristotle to hold that the common perceptibles are not perceived by the special senses (p. 70, fn. 3).

² Readers may be forgiven for being perplexed that Gregorić, in Part III of his book, refers to this capacity as 'the common sense', even though in Part II he establishes convincingly that Aristotle (never mind Theophrastus or Alexander of Aphrodisias) does not use this expression to denote any such capacity. But let that pass.

of colours at once. What philosophical argument could convince anyone of that?

Gregorić anticipates the objection, and replies that it is not his interpretation 'that makes Aristotle's account problematic, but Aristotle's fundamental assumption that only one special perceptible can actualize the corresponding individual sense at one time' (p. 156). However, that Aristotle is committed to thinking this, let alone adopts it as a fundamental assumption, is very much part of Gregorić's interpretation. Furthermore, it is false.

The text on the basis of which Gregorić saddles Aristotle with what I shall call the Troublesome Assumption is *De Sensu* 7. This is a long chapter in which Aristotle articulates a difficulty for thinking that it is possible to perceive two special perceptibles 'in one undivided time', or simultaneously. The difficulty arises because there are reasons for thinking that perceiving two things at once is impossible, and yet it had better be possible to do so, as people seem to have no trouble, say, seeing black letters and white background at the same time, or simultaneously perceiving a rose as red and as fragrant.

In presenting reasons for thinking that one cannot perceive two things at the same time, Aristotle relies on the premise that 'one act of perception is of one thing' (447^b11, revisited at 449^a8). In context this means that the object of a single perceptual act must be one thing. (How he gets from there to the further claim that one cannot simultaneously perceive two or more things need not detain us.) The claim that the object of a single perceptual act must be one thing is open to being interpreted in different ways. If different special perceptibles (e.g. black and white, or white and sweet) count in each case as distinct things, never somehow making up some one thing, the claim rules out the possibility of perceiving more than one special perceptible in one perceptual act. If the claim is only that what is perceived in a single perceptual act must be a unified something or other, it does allow perceiving any number of special perceptibles in one perceptual act, provided that in perceiving them one is perceiving a unified something or other—say, a journal page, with black letters on white background, or a rose, red and fragrant. In articulating the difficulty, Aristotle takes the claim in the former way. In resolving it, he in effect adopts the second interpretation, pointing out that objects of perception that are numerically one can be white, sweet, and many other things at the same time (449^a14–16).

Aristotle also thinks that to enable perceivers to perceive in a single perceptual act objects that are white, sweet, and many other things, the system of perceptual capacities that contribute to the act must be both unified and

potentially complex. It must constitute a unified capacity so that it can be exercised in a single perceptual act. That it must be potentially complex is due to Aristotle's conception of perception as assimilation: perceiving is taking on perceptible form, and in taking on the perceptible forms of whiteness, sweetness, and many other things, the perceptual capacity comes to mirror the complexity of the object that is being perceived.

In general, Aristotle holds that the ability simultaneously to perceive two or more special perceptibles requires that the perceptual capacity be potentially complex, capable of simultaneously taking on the perceptible forms in question. Now recall that according to Gregorić, Aristotle holds that 'only one special perceptible can actualize the corresponding individual sense at one time'. This is the Troublesome Assumption. Gregorić ascribes this assumption to Aristotle because he takes him to hold that none of the senses has the potential complexity needed to be able to take on more than one perceptible form at a time. Only the perceiver's whole system of perceptual capacities has that potential complexity. And so it follows that while one can perceive white and black at the same time, one cannot see two (or more) colours at once.

This interpretation raises a number of questions, but the central one, and the only one I now want to pursue, is this. Why think that none of the senses, according to Aristotle, has the potential complexity needed to take on more than one perceptible form at a time? 'The suggestion that the senses are themselves divisible', says Gregorić (p. 141), 'is decisively rejected at 448^b22–449^a2.'

Let us turn to that passage, then. The passage presents an attempt to resolve the difficulty by suggesting that perceivers simultaneously perceive different perceptibles, such as different colours, by perceiving them with different parts or aspects of their souls. The suggestion is strengthened by a comparison with the eyes: just as perceivers employ two eyes in seeing, 'someone might say that nothing prevents things from being like this also in the soul' (448^b26–7). Aristotle responds that the eyes together constitute something that is one, and their activity is a single one. He adds that if in the case of the soul some one thing is constituted from the two soul-parts or soul-aspects in question, that one thing would be what does the perceiving. On the other hand, if the two soul-parts really are separate, then the comparison with the eyes breaks down. 'Furthermore', Aristotle says, 'there will be a plurality of the same senses' (448^b29–30): that is so, he explains, because the activity in question will not be in place without the corresponding capacity.

The thought is that two simultaneous activities of seeing require two capacities that correspond to those two activities, because the simultaneous occurrence of two distinct activities requires the existence of two distinct capacities that are being exercised at the same time. But a capacity for seeing is a sense of sight, and so if a given perceiver engages in two distinct but simultaneous activities of seeing, 'there will be a plurality of the same senses' in the perceiver's soul. Two senses of sight will simultaneously be at work in a single perceiver. For Aristotle, this is an absurd result. No doubt, this is meant to be a decisive rejection.

But note that what is being rejected is specifically a view according to which seeing two colours at once is a matter of simultaneously engaging in two distinct activities of seeing. The point that two activities require two capacities has no impact on an alternative view according to which seeing two or more colours at once is a matter of engaging in only one activity of seeing. And plainly Aristotle means to direct our attention to such an alternative view, when he considers the possibility that the different soul-parts (or whatever) that are involved in simultaneously seeing different colours constitute some one thing, and notes that in this case it will be that single, but complex thing that does the perceiving. In that case, the comparison with the eyes remains intact: the eyes together constitute a single thing, namely the organ of sight. As Aristotle also points out, the activity of the organ of sight, complex though it is, is one. The idea must be that likewise there will be just one activity of perceiving, constituted by the exercise of the single, though complex, part of the soul that, on the view under consideration, 'does the perceiving'.

It should be clear, then, that in objecting that 'furthermore, there will be a plurality of the same senses', Aristotle has in mind only one of two ways of developing the suggestion that two soul-parts are involved when a given perceiver perceives different special perceptibles at the same time. These soul-parts constitute a single thing or they are separate (*εἰ μὲν ἐν τὸ ἐξ ἀμφοῖν ... εἰ δὲ χωρὶς ...* 448^b28–29). Only the second way of developing the suggestion leads to two simultaneous activities of seeing, and therefore to two senses of sight at work in a single perceiver. So Aristotle has two objections to that second way of developing the suggestion: first, in that case the comparison with the perceiver's two eyes breaks down; secondly, there will be a proliferation of senses of sight in any given perceiver.

As for the first way of developing the suggestion, Aristotle says that if the relevant soul-parts constitute some one thing, that thing will be what does the perceiving. That is not an objection. The idea is that in this case, the

soul-parts involved constitute some one thing, a single perceptual capacity, and, just as in the case of the organ of sight, the perceptual activity that is its exercise is a single activity. It seems reasonable to ascribe that single activity to the composite of the two soul-parts that contribute to it. That composite will be the sense of sight in action. Or at least, and this for present purposes is the important point, nothing in the whole passage (or, for that matter, in the remainder of *De Sensu 7*) rules out that the sense of sight, while being a single capacity, is potentially complex, in such a way as to be capable of taking on any number of perceptual forms at once. And so it turns out that *De Sensu 7* does not, after all, provide a basis for saddling Aristotle with Gregorić's Troublesome Assumption. Nothing in his theory of perception forces Aristotle to deny that one really can see any number of colours at once, just as one really can see the motion of cars on the street, and feel the shape of a journal. There is no good reason to think that Aristotle corrects one mistake of artificially impoverishing the senses, only to make a new mistake of the same kind.

As is customary for philosophy book reviews, my discussion has for the most part been critical, and so I have naturally focused on what I take to be shortcomings. This is in no way meant to detract from the fact that Gregorić has produced a valuable contribution to our understanding both of Aristotle's philosophical terminology and of his theory of perception. Some of the texts he discusses in the book, such as *De Sensu 7*, have long been neglected, even though they provide substantive additions to and clarifications of Aristotle's theory. In discussing those and other texts, Gregorić provides us with well-informed, detailed, and lucid interpretations, which, it should be added, are for the most part clearly correct and helpful. All serious students of ancient psychology should read this book. It will inform, illuminate, and stimulate.

Hendrik Lorenz
Department of Philosophy
203 Marx Hall
Princeton University
Princeton, NJ 08544-1006
USA

<hlorenz@princeton.edu>