

ARISTOTLE'S DIRECT REALISM IN *DE ANIMA*

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Abstract

Aristotle can be read as proposing a direct realism instead of a representationalism: a causal medium notwithstanding, perception and thought are directly about qualities, things, or events in the world. The received sensible or intelligible forms are instantiated in the acts of perception or thought. I argue that this direct realism presupposes Aristotle's ontology according to which the world has a somewhat conceptual structure: our percepts and concepts are qualitatively identical with the very forms of the things themselves. In conclusion, I point out that contemporary positions of a direct realism are committed to a conceptual structure of the world too. Thus, the challenge for a direct realist is to either accept such an ontology or to show how a direct intentional relation of thoughts to the world is possible without such an ontological commitment.

I.

Aristotle's theory of perception and thought in books 2 and 3 of *de Anima* is usually interpreted along the lines of a representationalism: in perception and thought, we receive sensible or intelligible forms. These forms are representations of qualities, things or events in the world. We gain epistemic access to the world by means of these representations. In this paper I argue that contrary to received opinion, Aristotle's text can also be read as a direct realism: we have epistemic access to the world in perception and thought without representations intervening as epistemic intermediaries.¹

The debate between representationalism and direct realism is a central issue in today's epistemology and philosophy of mind. The terminology that is used in this debate is a modern one. From a philological perspective it is therefore questionable whether it is appropriate to approach Aristotle's texts by using the concepts of representationalism and direct realism.² However, when it comes to Aristotle's significance for today's philosophy, the interest is in what we can learn from the study of his texts for those points that continue to be an issue today. In that respect, my claim is twofold: (a) Aristotle does not have to be seen as lending support to the representationalist camp – his texts can also be received in the spirit of direct realism; and (b) direct realism is an option that fits into Aristotle's philosophy because he assumes that the forms of the things in the world are also our percepts and concepts.

¹ For helpful criticism of an earlier version of this paper I am grateful to Burkhard Hafemann, Ludger Jansen and Holmer Steinfath.

² Compare Andreas Graeser, "On Aristotle's Framework of Sensibilia," in *Aristotle on Mind and the Senses. Proceedings of the Seventh Symposium Aristotelicum*, eds. G. E. R. Lloyd and G. E. L. Owen (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1978), 69–97, in particular 86–91.

[322] Interestingly enough, prominent advocates of a direct realism in today's philosophy such as John McDowell also argue along that Aristotelian line: the assumption that the world has a conceptual structure is a prerequisite for making the option of direct realism available. The systematic conclusion of this paper therefore is this: Direct realism has a price. As taking Aristotle's texts into account emphasizes, one either has to buy into an ontology according to which the world has a somewhat conceptual structure, or one has to undertake the task of accomplishing a theory of a direct intentional link of perceptions and thoughts to the world that is neutral as regards such an ontology.

I shall first give a presentation of the representationalist interpretation of *de Anima* (section 2). I will then sketch out the interpretation according to which Aristotle puts forward in *de Anima* what is in modern terms a direct realism (section 3). Finally, I shall consider the systematic significance of this direct realism (section 4).

II.

At the beginning of *de Interpretatione*, Aristotle refers to *de Anima* and sums up some of the issues that he considers in the latter treatise in this way:

Now spoken sounds are symbols of affections [*παθημάτων*] in the soul, and written marks symbols of spoken sounds. And just as written marks are not the same for all men, neither are spoken sounds. But what these are in the first place signs [*σημεία*] of—affections of the soul—are the same for all; and what these affections are likenesses [*ὁμοιώματα*] of—actual things [*πράγματα*]*—are also the same.*³

This citation is one of the key passages that are considered as evidence for a representationalist reading of Aristotle's epistemology: Things in the world cause mental images that are representations (*ὁμοιώματα*) of these things in the soul of the perceiving and thinking person. In perception and thought, a person has epistemic access to the world by means of such representations. The transition to language consists in developing words that are signs of these [323] representations in the first place. Linguistic items refer to things in the world by means of being signs for representations.

A number of statements in *de Anima* can be taken to confirm such an interpretation. A prominent statement in that respect is this one:

Generally, about all perception, we can say that a sense is what has the power of receiving into itself the sensible forms of things without the matter, in the way in which a piece of wax takes on the impress of a signet-ring without the iron or the gold.⁴

Aristotle makes a similar statement about thought:

What it [thought, *νοῦς*] thinks must be in it just as characters may be said to be on a writing-table on which as yet nothing actually stands written: this is exactly what happens with thought.⁵

³ *de Interpretatione* 1, 16a3–8. All the English translations in this paper are adopted from *The Complete Works of Aristotle. The Revised Oxford Translation*, ed. Jonathan Barnes, vol. 1 (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1984).

⁴ *de Anima* 2.12, 424a17–20.

⁵ *de Anima* 3.4, 429b 31 – 430a 2.

The latter quotation in particular supports an empiricist reading of Aristotle according to which he conceives the soul as a *tabula rasa* before it receives impressions. Moreover, Aristotle describes perception as a being acted upon (*πάσχειν*),⁶ which is caused by the object.⁷ Perception is a becoming like (*ὅμοιος*) the object by receiving a form (without matter) from it,⁸ that is, a sensible form.⁹ The same goes for thought—to be more precise, noetic thought. In Aristotle, noetic thought is a prepredicative manner of thought that consists in entertaining concepts (*νοήματα*). Predication is dianoetic thought. It presupposes noetic thought.¹⁰ Aristotle conceives noetic thought in analogy to perception:¹¹ it is a passive process (*πάσχειν*)¹² of becoming like the object by receiving an intelligible form from it.¹³ I shall [324] consider only thoughts that are about the world, that is, thoughts whose intentional object are things in the world.

On the basis of statements such as the mentioned ones, a number of scholars attribute to Aristotle a view of perception and thought along the following lines:¹⁴ In perception, we have access to the world by means of sense impressions. These are representations that function as an epistemic intermediary between the acts of perception and the qualities, things or events in the world that are perceived. The same goes for thought. It is irrelevant to the epistemological issues with which I am concerned in this paper whether these representations are conceived as something immaterial or as something material.¹⁵

Such a position is a representational realism. It is reasonable to distinguish between two versions of representational realism, namely a weak one and a strong one. Weak representational realism is the claim that a person has epistemic access to the world in her

⁶ *de Anima* 2.5, 416b 33–34, 418a 5, 2.7, 419a 17–18, and 2.11, 424a 1.

⁷ *de Anima* 2.5, 417b 20, 2.10, 422b 15–16, and 3.7, 431a 4–5; *de Sensu* 2, 438b 22–23. Compare W. David Ross, *Aristotle, De Anima. Text, Introduction, Commentary* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1961), 24–25; Karen Gloy, “Aristoteles’ Konzeption der Seele in „De Anima“,” *Zeitschrift für philosophische Forschung* 38 (1984): 381–411, in particular 406–09.

⁸ *de Anima* 2.7, 418a 3–6, 2.11, 424a 1–2, and 3.4, 429b 30–31.

⁹ *de Anima* 2.12, 424a 18, 3.8, 432a 2–5, compare 3.2, 425b 23–24.

¹⁰ See Klaus Oehler, *Die Lehre vom noetischen und dianoetischen Denken bei Platon und Aristoteles. Ein Beitrag zur Erforschung der Geschichte des Bewußtseinsproblems in der Antike* (Munich: Beck, 1962), second part.

¹¹ *de Anima* 3.3, 427a 19–20 and 3.4, 429a 13–14.

¹² *de Anima* 3.4, 429a 13–15 and 429b 24–25.

¹³ *de Anima* 3.4, 429a 13–18, 27–29, and 3.7, 431b 2; *Metaphysics* 12.7, 1072a 30 and 1072b 22.

¹⁴ For a recent clear exposition see Victor Caston, “Aristotle and the Problem of Intentionality,” *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 58 (1998): 249–98, in particular 261–262. See also Deborah K. W. Modrak, *Aristotle. The Power of Perception* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987), 33–35, 55–80, 99–107.

¹⁵ As to such a materialist view of Aristotle’s theory of perception, see in particular Thomas J. Slakey, “Aristotle on Sense Perception,” *Philosophical Review* 70 (1961): 470–84; Philip Webb, “Bodily Structure and Psychic Faculties in Aristotle’s Theory of Perception,” *Hermes* 110 (1982): 25–50; Terrell Ward Bynum, “A new Look at Aristotle’s Theory of Perception,” *History of Philosophy Quarterly* 4 (1987): 163–78; Richard Sorabji, “Intentionality and Physiological Processes: Aristotle’s Theory of Sense-Perception,” in *Essays on Aristotle’s “De Anima”*, eds. M. C. Nussbaum and A. Oksenberg Rorty (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992), 195–225; Stephen Everson, *Aristotle on Perception* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), Chapter 5, in particular p. 203.

states of perception and thought only by means of representations. (The epistemic access is the access that a person has to the world by being in states of perception and thought). Representations unlock the world for a person, so to speak: it is in virtue of being related to a mental representation that a state of perception or thought is about something in the world. The mental representation thereby mediates between the state of perception or thought and its intentional object in the world.

Strong representational realism is the claim that these representations themselves are the immediate intentional objects of our states of perception or thought. It is only by being immediately about [325] mental representations that the states of perception or thought of a person are—mediately, so to speak—about the world. Thus, for example, in a situation of an ordinary and veridical perception of a tree, what the person in question is directly aware of is in fact a mental representation of a tree. She directly perceives mental representations and indirectly perceives via these representations qualities, things and events in the world. Whereas weak representational realism only claims that there are representations that function as an epistemic intermediary, strong representational realism is the stronger thesis, because it maintains that these representations are the immediate intentional objects of our ordinary perceptions and thoughts. Most of those scholars who take Aristotle to set out a representationalist epistemology interpret his texts along the lines of weak representational realism. However, Stephen Everson, in *Aristotle on Perception*,¹⁶ goes as far as ascribing to Aristotle a strong representationalist position: according to him, Aristotle tells us that we perceive things in the world in virtue of being aware of representations.¹⁷

The most obvious objection against strong representational realism is that it moves the task of accounting for the aboutness of states of perception and thought only one step back: one does not account for the aboutness of states of perception and thought by saying that these states are immediately about items inside the perceiving or thinking person. However, as the distinction between weak and strong representational realism shows, when it comes to challenging the interpretation of Aristotle along the lines of representational realism it is not sufficient to elaborate on that objection against strong representational realism (as, for instance, Wolfgang Welsch does).¹⁸ When it comes to the issue whether or not Aristotle is most plausibly regarded as holding a position that can in modern terminology be described as a representational realism, the target view should be weak representational realism.¹⁹

[326] The passages that I mentioned at the beginning of this section do not tell the whole story of Aristotle's view of perception. Aristotle conceives perception not only as a receptive, passive process of taking in sensible forms. To start with, he makes use of a distinction between two sorts of potentiality (*δύναμις*) and actuality (*ἐνέργεια*). The potentiality of the senses is a second potentiality that is identical with a first actuality. The senses are an

¹⁶ See Everson, *Aristotle on Perception*.

¹⁷ See Everson, *Aristotle on Perception*, 175–77, 193–203.

¹⁸ Wolfgang Welsch, *Aisthesis. Grundzüge und Perspektiven der Aristotelischen Sinneslehre* (Stuttgart: Klett-Cotta, 1987), in particular 93, 186–87, 195.

¹⁹ Compare Gerald J. Massey's methodological guidelines for dealing with such philosophical issues that he sets out in his "The Indeterminacy of Translation: A Study in Philosophical Exegesis," *Philosophical Topics* 20 (1992): 317–45.

actuality in themselves in that they are realized as some sort of highly organized physiological matter. They are a potentiality in that they are capable of receiving sensible forms. When they actually receive sensible forms, their first actuality is turned into a second actuality: the senses then exercise their function. That change in the senses is caused by outside physical things.²⁰ Thus, the external stimulus is better described as causing a first actuality or activity (*ἐνέργεια*) to turn into a second one.

Aristotle then conceives perception as a discerning activity (*κρίνειν*).²¹ Thus, the reception of sensible forms is not only a passive process (*πάσχειν*), but also involves an activity on the part of the perceiving person. The same goes for noetic thought: it also implies a discerning activity (*κρίνειν*).²²

This point is important first as regards the question of whether it is appropriate to attribute to Aristotle the empiricist view that perception is reception of sensible qualities. For this discerning activity may be described as some sort of spontaneity that is involved in perception even before it comes to the application of concepts. Nonetheless, this is not a spontaneity in the modern, Kantian sense, that is, in the sense of an intentional activity that forms or constitutes the perceived object.²³

However, when it comes to the issue of whether or not Aristotle holds what is in modern terms a representational realism, the fact that he acknowledges a discerning activity in perception is not decisive. [327] For representational realism does not imply that acquiring the representations that act as an epistemic intermediary is a purely passive, receptive affair. Some discerning activity of the perceiving person may be necessary in order to take in what then becomes a representation (sense impression) that acts as an epistemic intermediary. Thus, representational realism is not tied to empiricism in the sense of the view that the mind is a *tabula rasa* and that perception is a purely receptive affair. Consequently, the distinction between a first and a second actuality as well as the acknowledgement of a discerning activity in perception do not decide the issue of representational versus direct realism in Aristotle.

Of more importance for that matter is another central passage in *de Anima*:

The activity [*ἐνέργεια*] of the sensible object and that of the sense is one and the same activity, and yet the distinction between their being [*εἶναι*] remains. Take as illustration actual sound and actual hearing: a man may have hearing and yet not be hearing, and that which has a sound is not always sounding. But when that which can hear is actively hearing and that which can sound is sounding, then the actual hearing and the actual sound come about at the same time (these one might call respectively hearkening and sounding).²⁴

²⁰ See *de Anima* 2.5, 417a 21 – b 26.

²¹ *de Anima* 2.6, 418a 14–15, 2.10, 422a 20–21, 2.12, 424a 5–6, 3.2, 425b 20–22, 426b 8–17, 3.3, 427a 20–21, 428a 3–4, and 3.7, 431a 20, 24–25. In *Analytica Posteriora* 2.19, 99b 35, perception is described as *δύναμις κριτική*. As to the translation of “*κρίνειν*” as “discerning”, see Theodor Ebert, “Aristotle on what is done in perceiving,” *Zeitschrift für philosophische Forschung* 37 (1983): 181–98.

²² See *de Anima* 3.3, 427a 20–21 and 428a 3–5

²³ Compare Wolfgang Bernard, *Rezeptivität und Spontaneität der Wahrnehmung bei Aristoteles* (Baden-Baden: Koerner, 1988), in particular Chapters 2.7 and 3.2. As to the soul in general as activity in Aristotle, see Johannes Hübner, “Die aristotelische Konzeption der Seele als Aktivität in *de Anima* II.1,” *Archiv für Geschichte der Philosophie* 81(1999): 1–32.

²⁴ *de Anima* 3.2, 425b 26 – 426a 1.

This is not to say that perception and the perceived object are numerically identical; for Aristotle emphasizes that their being is different.²⁵ Neither does this quotation mean that sensible qualities such as sound are located in the perceiving subject. Such sensible qualities are potentialities according to Aristotle. However, to the extent that they are potentialities, they are second potentialities. Second potentialities, to repeat, are identical with a first actuality. That is to say: such sensible qualities are actualities insofar as things are, for example, loud or red, but potentialities insofar as a thing's being loud or being red includes the disposition of making itself heard or seen, provided that [328] there are living beings with the appropriate sense organs.²⁶ In other places, Aristotle makes clear that excessive sensible qualities such as a very harsh sound can destroy the sense organ.²⁷ Thus, these qualities exist independently of perception.²⁸

The point of the quoted passage is that the sounding activity of the thing reaches its second actuality only when the form of sound of the thing is received without the matter by a perceiving person. Aristotle makes clear that this second actuality of the perceived object is reached in the act of perception and thus lies in the perceiving person.²⁹ This point can be generalized: insofar as qualities are sensible, they reach their second actuality only by making themselves perceived.

The point of this passage as regards the issue of representational versus direct realism is this: second actuality is identical with the act of perception of the person. There is nothing in this passage which suggests that the sensible form is an epistemic intermediary between the act of perception of the person and the intentional object of that act in the world. By stating that identity this passage is strong evidence for interpreting Aristotle's philosophy of perception in the spirit of direct realism.³⁰ The same identity of *ἐνέργεια* holds for noetic thought, that is, the *ἐνέργεια* of thinking and the *ἐνέργεια* of its object.³¹ We consequently can interpret Aristotle's theory of noetic thought along the lines of direct realism as well.

III.

[329] In contrast to the received view of Aristotle giving a representationalist account of perception and thought, I shall sketch in this section what a reading of *de Anima* along the

²⁵ See *de Anima* 3.2, 425b 26–27, and 426a 15–17.

²⁶ See for example Horst Seidl, *Der Begriff des Intellekts (νοῦς) bei Aristoteles* (Meisenheim: Hain, 1971), 97–98; Anthony C. Lloyd, "Was Aristotle's Theory of Perception Lockean?," *Ratio* 21 (1979): 135–48, in particular 135–8; Myles F. Burnyeat, "Idealism and Greek Philosophy: What Descartes Saw and Berkeley Missed," in *Idealism Past and Present*, ed. G. Vesey (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982), 19–50, in particular 29; Jonathan Lear, *Aristotle: The Desire to Understand* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), 102–09; Allan Silverman, "Color and Color-Perception in Aristotle's 'De Anima'," *Ancient Philosophy* 9 (1989): 271–92, in particular 284–6.

²⁷ *de Anima* 2.12, 424a 28–32, 3.2, 426a 30 – b 3, 3.4, 429a 31 – b 3, and 3.13, 435b 7–9.

²⁸ For a contrary position see for instance Friedo Ricken, "Probleme der Aristotelischen Wahrnehmungslehre", *Philosophische Rundschau* 38 (1991): 209–24, in particular 210–15.

²⁹ *de Anima* 3.2, 426a 10–11.

³⁰ See Wolfgang Welsch, *Aisthesis*, in particular Chapter 3.

³¹ *de Anima* 3.4, 429b 30–31, 430a 3–5, 3.5, 430a 19–20, 3.7, 431a 1–2, and 431b 17; *Metaphysics* 12.7, 1072b 21–22.

lines of a direct realism can look like. Direct realism is the thesis that there are no epistemic intermediaries between acts or states of perception and thought and the qualities, things or events in the world that are the intentional objects of these acts or states. Nothing hinders the existence of causal intermediaries between a state of perception and what that state is about. For instance, if one has the veridical perception of a sparrow in the tree, light, sensory stimuli, nerve signals, brain processes, and so forth, can be considered as causal intermediaries between the sparrow in the tree and the state of perceiving the sparrow in the tree. These factors belong to the causes of the event that the person in question enters into the state of perceiving the sparrow in the tree. However, when it comes to the epistemic relation of the state of perception being about the sparrow in the tree, there is nothing which intervenes between this state and the sparrow in the tree. The mentioned causal factors may be a necessary (and perhaps a sufficient) condition for that epistemic relation to obtain, but they are not a *relatum* within that relation. The state of perception is directly related to its intentional object, the sparrow in the tree.³²

Aristotle insists that perception requires a medium.³³ For instance, in seeing, light is a medium.³⁴ What Aristotle describes as a medium are causal intermediaries that contribute to bringing about in a person a state of perception of a quality, thing, or event in the world. The medium is not an epistemic intermediary: the intentional relation between a state of perception and its object does not involve the medium. This point is neutral as regards the issue of direct versus representational realism: if one ascribes a representational realism to Aristotle, the epistemic intermediary is not a representation of the medium, but a representation of the perceived quality, thing, or event. The medium is in no way represented in ordinary perception.

[330] Furthermore, according to the received view of Aristotle, perception involves a material alteration in the perceiving subject such as a change in the state of a particular sense organ. This view has become a matter of dispute recently: Myles Burnyeat and T. K. Johansen go as far as denying that there is a material alteration.³⁵ John Sisko and Stephen Everson make a case in favor of a material alteration, against Burnyeat.³⁶ However, this debate again is neutral as regards the issue of direct versus representational realism: if a material alteration in a particular sense organ is a necessary condition for any perception, such an alteration can be acknowledged by the direct realist as a causal intermediary. Over

³² Compare Steven M. Nadler, *Arnauld and the Cartesian Philosophy of Ideas* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1989), 11–12.

³³ Except possibly for touch; see *de Anima* 3.13, 435a 14–19.

³⁴ *de Anima* 2.7, 418b 3 – 419b 2.

³⁵ Myles F. Burnyeat, “Is an Aristotelian Philosophy of Mind still Credible? A Draft,” in *Essays on Aristotle's “De Anima”*, eds. M. C. Nussbaum and A. Oksenberg Rorty (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992), 15–26; Myles F. Burnyeat, “Aristote voit du rouge et entend un «do»: Combien se passe-t-il de choses? Remarques sur «De Anima», II, 7–8,” *Revue philosophique de la France et de l'Etranger* 118 (1993): 263–80; T. K. Johansen, *Aristotle on the Sense-Organs* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), Chapter 6.

³⁶ John E. Sisko, “Material Alteration and Cognitive Activity in Aristotle's “De Anima”,” *Phronesis* 41 (1996): 138–57; Stephen Everson, *Aristotle on Perception*, in particular Chapters 2 and 6.

and above that, as far as direct realism is concerned, nothing hinders the act of perception or thought being realized as some sort of an arrangement of physiological matter.

All of Aristotle's statements describing perception as the reception of a form, which involves some discerning activity (*κρίνειν*), can be seen as describing the manner in which a person gets into the state of, for instance, perceiving a color or a sparrow. The received form is instantiated in the act of perception. In ordinary perception, it does not exist in distinction from that act. Hence, it is not an epistemic intermediary between the act of perception and the intentional object of that act in the world. Instead, receiving the form is itself the state of perceiving something in the world. Consequently, the state of perception directly relates to its intentional object.³⁷ Nothing hinders the regarding of the act of perception itself as representing a quality, thing, or event in the world. The point is that there are no representations in distinction from that act. Thus, the act itself represents something by instantiating a form; it does not represent by being related to a form as its intentional object.

[331] As described in the preceding section, the perceiving faculty is in a first actuality that includes the potentiality of becoming like its object. The act of perception then is the act of becoming like (*ὅμοιος*) the object by receiving a form without matter. Thus, what the state of perception is about, what its intentional object is, is identified by means of a *qualitative* identity between the state of perception of the person and a quality, thing or event in the world, given an appropriate causal relation between the object in question and the person.³⁸ No epistemic intermediary is needed, because the state of perception itself consists in having become like the perceived object. That is not to say that if one perceives a red color, one enters into a state of being red. What the state of perception instantiates is the form in virtue of which some material thing is red, but not the red matter.³⁹ What is more, as described at the end of the last section, the act of perception is not only a becoming like the object on the side of the perceiving person, but also, as regards the object, insofar as it is perceptible it achieves its second actuality by making itself perceived.

Not only does Aristotle's thesis that the second actuality (*ἐνέργεια*) of the perceived object is identical with the *ἐνέργεια* of the act of perception of the person fit into this interpretation in terms of a direct realism; this interpretation can also handle the passages which I quoted at the beginning of the preceding section and which are considered as evidence for ascribing a representational realism to Aristotle. The example of the wax and the signet-ring⁴⁰ does not say that there is a received form that functions as an epistemic intermediary between the state of perception and its intentional object. Instead, the simile describes the act of perception as the act of receiving a form without matter. But this then does not hinder our saying that the

³⁷ Compare Wolfgang Welsch, *Aisthesis*, in particular 93, 186–7, and 195.

³⁸ Compare the argument of Christopher Shields, "Intentionality and Isomorphism in Aristotle," in *Proceedings of the Boston Area Colloquium in Ancient Philosophy*, Volume 11, eds. J. J. Cleary and W. C. Wians (Lanham: University Press of America, 1995), 307–30, in particular 322–7, in favor of what he calls "weak isomorphism" and against what he calls "strong isomorphism", which implies *numerical* identity.

³⁹ Compare *de Anima* 2.12, 424a 21–24 and see against interpretations to the contrary Julie K. Ward, "Perception and Logos in 'De anima' ii 12," *Ancient Philosophy* 8 (1988): 217–33; David Bradshaw, "Aristotle on Perception: The Dual-Logos Theory," *Apeiron* 30 (1997): 143–62.

⁴⁰ *de Anima* 2.12, 424a 17–20.

act [332] of perception directly relates to its intentional object (because it is formally like its object).

The opening statement of *de Interpretatione* also admits of an interpretation along these lines. The percepts and concepts that constitute a state of perception or thought are likenesses (*ὁμοιώματα*) of actual things because they are qualitatively identical with the forms of actual things. These percepts and concepts do not have to be conceived as epistemic intermediaries. Actually entertaining these percepts or concepts in one's soul is the state of perceiving or thinking itself that directly relates to its intentional object in the world. Such a state can also be expressed in a language. Only insofar as a linguistic item expresses such a state is it a sign of such a state. Nevertheless, a sentence can be directly about a thing, an event, or a state of affairs in the world.

This interpretation can be corroborated by turning to noetic thought. As mentioned in the preceding section, Aristotle conceives noetic thought in analogy to perception. According to Aristotle, the concept "stone", for example, is qualitatively identical with the essential form (*εἶδος*) of a stone—whereby, again, the object, insofar as it is intelligible, reaches its second actuality by making its form actualized without the matter in the soul of a thinking person. A person thinks about a stone by actually entertaining the concept (*νόημα*) of a stone in his soul. The presence of a stone can cause a person to actually entertain the concept of a stone. The person then is directly aware of the stone in question in his act of thinking. Again, there is only the act or state of thinking (actually entertaining a concept) and its intentional object, something in the world. The received form, the concept, is instantiated in the act of thinking. What the act of thinking is about is identified by the qualitative identity of the concept in the soul and the—essential—form of the object, given an appropriate causal relation between the object and the person.⁴¹ Since the soul has the capacity to receive the forms of all things, that is, acquire the concepts of all sorts of things, Aristotle claims in the summary of his theory of perception and thought that the soul is potentially all things:

[333] ... the soul is in a way all existing things [*ἡ ψυχὴ τὰ ὄντα πῶς ἐστὶ πάντα*]; for existing things are either sensible or thinkable, and knowledge is in a way what is knowable, and sensation is in a way what is sensible ... Within the soul the faculties of knowledge and sensation are *potentially* these objects, the one what is knowable, the other what is sensible. They must be either the things themselves or their forms. The former alternative is of course impossible: it is not the stone which is present in the soul but its form [*οὐ γὰρ ὁ λίθος ἐν τῇ ψυχῇ ἀλλὰ τὸ εἶδος*]. It follows that the soul is analogous to the hand; for as the hand is a tool of tools, so thought is the form of forms and sense the form of sensible things [*ὁ νοῦς εἶδος εἰδῶν καὶ ἡ αἴσθησις εἶδος αἰσθητῶν*].⁴²

Thus, the act of perception or thought consists in instantiating a form which is qualitatively identical with a form in the object that is perceived or thought about.

⁴¹ For a contemporary position along these lines, see John Haldane, "A Return to Form in the Philosophy of Mind", *Ratio* 11 (1998): pp. 253–77, in particular 267–69.

⁴² *de Anima* 3.7, 431b 21 – 432a 3.

Aristotle maintains that as far as perception by one sense or simple, that is, noetic, thought is concerned, there is no error possible:⁴³ either the form in question is instantiated in the act of perception or thought, or it is not instantiated in that act. Owing to the causal intermediaries, in the presence of a stone, it may of course be possible to actually entertain the concept “fox”, but then one is not in the state of thinking about a fox; for there is nothing of what such a thought could be about, since there is no fox present. One may thus contemplate attributing to Aristotle some sort of an externalism with respect to singular thoughts.⁴⁴ Nonetheless, the issue of externalism versus internalism is logically independent of the issue of direct realism versus representationalism: in principle, each of the latter positions can be combined with either one of the former positions. According to Aristotle, error can only occur in dianoetic thoughts, that is, thoughts that involve the combination (*συνπλοκή*) of two or more concepts and thus are predicative thoughts such as, for example, “This stone is grey”.⁴⁵ In [334] perception, error is possible only when it comes to the question of to which thing the perceived quality belongs.⁴⁶

IV.

Why can Aristotle's theory of perception and thought be received within the framework of a direct realism? Ontologically speaking, the crucial point is this: Aristotle holds that the things in the world are made up of form and matter. The forms of the things in the world are qualitatively identical with our percepts and concepts. Thus, the structure of the thinking and perceiving mind is identical with the structure of the world. That is why Aristotle's epistemology does not need an epistemic intermediary which ties a state of perception or thought to its intentional object; and that is why, given the existence of things that are constituted of form and matter, it is irrelevant to that direct realism whether the mind simply receives something or whether and to what extent perception and thought involve some sort of a spontaneous activity. Aristotle's direct realism is hence grounded in an ontology according to which our percepts and concepts are identical with the forms of things. In this sense, from today's point of view, we can say that Aristotle regards the world as having a conceptual structure.

Direct realism has become fashionable in today's philosophy, for it seems to be the appropriate means to avoid the gap between thought and world that is a major issue in modern philosophy. One of the most distinguished proponents of direct realism is John McDowell. In his John Locke lectures,⁴⁷ McDowell characterizes modern epistemology as an

⁴³ Perception: *de Anima* 2.6, 418a 11–16, 3.3, 427b 11–12, 428a 11, b 18–22, 27–29, and 3.6, 430b 29; *de Sensu* 4, 442b 8–10; *Metaphysics* 4.5, 1010b 1–3. Thought: *de Anima* 3.3, 428a 17–18, 3.5, 430a 26–27, and 3.6, 430b 26–29; *Metaphysics* 9.10, 1051b 17 – 1052a 4.

⁴⁴ As to such an externalism in today's philosophy, see Gareth Evans, *The Varieties of Reference*, ed. John McDowell (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1982), in particular Chapters 6 and 9, and John McDowell, “Singular Thought and the Extent of Inner Space,” in *Subject, Thought, and Context*, eds. Philip Pettit and John McDowell (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986), 137–68.

⁴⁵ *de Anima* 3.6, 430a 26 – b 3 and 3.8, 432a 11–12. Compare *Categories* 2, 1a 16–19, 4, 2a 4–10; *de Interpretatione* 10, 19b 11–12.

⁴⁶ *de Anima* 2.6, 418a 14–16, 3.1, 425a 30 – b 4, 3.3, 428b 21–30, and 3.6, 430b 29–30.

⁴⁷ John McDowell, *Mind and World* (Cambridge (Massachusetts): Harvard University Press, 1994).

oscillation between on the one hand a mere coherentism and on the other hand the Myth of the Given. This latter term goes back to Wilfrid Sellars.⁴⁸ For the purposes of this paper, we can associate the Myth of the Given with a representationalist view of perception and thought: there are representations which act as an epistemic intermediary [335] between the state of perceiving or believing something and the intentional object of that state in the world. The objection that gives rise to the disparaging description “Myth of the Given” then is that it is incoherent to assume the following: there is something which is, on the one hand, merely causally given and thus not conceptual but which has, on the other hand, an epistemic function insofar as it mediates in an epistemic sense between the state of perception or thought and its intentional object in the world. The contrary position is a mere coherentism that acknowledges epistemic relations solely among conceptual items and admits only a causal relation between the world and our thoughts. According to McDowell, both these positions fail to give a convincing account of how thoughts, including perceptions, can be about the world; they thereby invite skepticism with respect to the physical world.

As regards the direct realism that I have attributed to Aristotle the point now is this: McDowell maintains that direct realism gives a satisfactory account of how thoughts, including perceptions, can be about the world only if it admits a rational relation between the world and our thoughts. According to McDowell, it is a necessary and sufficient condition for there being a rational relation between the world and our thoughts that the conceptual realm has no boundary. That is to say: the conceptual realm does not end where persons and their interactions end. The world itself is somewhat conceptual. For McDowell, the world is composed of facts in the sense of the conceptual contents of true thoughts.⁴⁹ According to McDowell, a direct realism that does not acknowledge such a conceptual structure of the world is doomed to end up in a mere coherentism, which leaves our thoughts spinning in the void, for it fails to ensure an epistemic relation of aboutness between our thoughts and something in the world. Thus, both in McDowell and in Aristotle direct realism in epistemology is tied to an ontology according to which the world itself has a conceptual structure. It is irrelevant to that matter whether one takes single concepts to be in themselves items of knowledge and thus identifies them with the forms in things, or whether, subsequent to Frege's work, one admits only entire propositions as items of knowledge and thus takes the world to be composed of facts in the sense of the conceptual contents of true propositional thoughts.

[336] Direct realism is an attractive position. However, it loses much of its attraction if one has to buy into an ontology according to which the world has a somewhat conceptual structure. Whatever the merits or demerits of such an ontology may be, one would better have an epistemology that does not commit one to such an ontology. The link between an epistemology of direct realism and an ontology of a conceptual structure of the world can be illustrated by taking into account the way in which direct realism is an option that fits into Aristotle's philosophy—that is to say, why there is no systematic need for Aristotle to admit

⁴⁸ Wilfrid Sellars, “Empiricism and the Philosophy of Mind,” in *Science, Perception and Reality*, ed. Wilfrid Sellars (London: Routledge, 1963), 127–96.

⁴⁹ See McDowell, *Mind and World*, lecture 4.

representations as an epistemic intermediary. Hence, the considerations that I have put forward in this paper emphasize that direct realism has a price: one either has to buy into an ontology of a conceptual structure of the world, or one has to undertake the task of developing a version of direct realism that can assure a direct relation between our states of perception or thought and their intentional objects in the world without having to subscribe to such an ontological commitment.

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