

Anna Marmodoro
 ARISTOTLE ON PERCEIVING OBJECTS
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Aristotle begins the *Metaphysics* with one of his most memorable pronouncements: “All men by nature desire to know”. One sign that this is so, says Aristotle, is the delight we take in our senses. Though his teacher Plato denigrates our senses’ contributions, Aristotle insists that perception is the principal means whereby we acquire genuine knowledge of the world in which we live. What better evidence could there be that a desire for knowledge is essential to us, than a universally present delight directed upon its sources?

We open our eyes and the world itself appears before us. It is a world populated by an almost limitless number of persistent objects in which colours, sounds, tastes, odors, feels, shapes, and movements are co-present. Perception gives an organism the sense that it is an individual thing systematically embedded within this richly qualified world. On Aristotle’s view, to perceive is to advance beyond the isolation and reflexivity of a plant’s merely nutritive existence. It is to realize a distinctive form of animate existence, namely, animal life.

Anna Marmodoro recognizes perception’s significance. In *Aristotle on Perceiving Objects*, she aims to provide an accurate interpretation of Aristotle’s views about perception, but she also wants to present and defend his account in a way that will aid her contemporaries as they grapple with the very same problems that exercise Aristotle. She succeeds remarkably in both tasks. Her broad discussion revolves around three central questions: How should we understand perception’s basic metaphysical structure? What is it that we perceive? How is complex perceptual content realized?

Marmodoro situates Aristotle’s metaphysics of perception within a broader “ontology of powers”. Powers are capacities to bring about or undergo change. They are intrinsic properties of the objects to which they belong, and they occur in interdependent pairs. For example, fire possesses an active power to heat and water possesses a passive power to be heated. Causation is a single activity that comprises the simultaneous exercises of related active and passive powers.

The link between the theory of perception with the theory of powers is not unique to Marmodoro’s work. But since she is a leading figure in this area of metaphysics, as well as a scholar of ancient Greek philosophy, she brings her considerable expertise to bear on Aristotle’s framework in a way that elevates her analysis over those that have come before.

An object’s sensible qualities (e.g. its colour and odour) are powers. To perceive is for two powers to be actualized: a perceptible object’s active power to affect a perceiver’s sense organs and a perceiver’s passive power to be affected by a perceptible object’s sensible qualities. Objects possess their qualities even when no one is there to perceive them. But there is an important sense in which objects are not coloured independently of their being perceived. An object’s colour is fully and completely realized only when it acts upon a perceiver and both it and the perceiver’s faculty of sight are actualized.

So Aristotle maintains a version of percep-

tual realism. What we perceive are the object’s fully realized powers to affect our senses. This account, however, is complicated by the fact that all perception requires a medium. For example, an object’s colour must first impart a movement to light and it is light that directly affects the sense organs associated with vision. Marmodoro attempts to negotiate a narrow path between those theories that provide thoroughly material explanations of these changes and those that depart from these material happenings altogether and take perception to be psychologically primitive. This is a delicate balancing act and Marmodoro’s account is not entirely satisfactory in uniting the material and psychological elements. It remains unclear why an exhaustively material explanation of a sensible object’s interactions with its medium is inadequate.

Marmodoro dedicates four chapters to the vexing problem of complex perceptual content. According to Aristotle, each of the five senses has its proprietary class of sensible qualities: with sight we perceive colours, with hearing, sounds, etc. Given this, how are we able to perceive unified objects with a variety of sensible qualities, rather than disjoint arrays of these qualities? And how are we able to perceive “common sensibles” such as shape and movement that are available to more than one sense modality? Aristotle invokes the notion of a “common sense” to solve these problems, but his remarks are notoriously terse and puzzling.

According to Marmodoro, the common sense is not an additional sixth sense. It is simply the five special senses taken together. The common sense is capable of perceiving complex objects and common sensibles. These novel perceptual functions emerge from the special senses acting as a single perceptual system. The operations of the special senses must be viewed as aspects of this single, unified perceptual faculty. Aristotle’s text does not entail one definitive interpretation, but Marmodoro’s account is plausible and avoids many of the obstacles upon which previous accounts stumble.

Marmodoro’s interpretations will not wholly supplant the numerous alternatives that are on offer. But her interpretations should be placed alongside them in any future discussion of Aristotle’s philosophy of perception. She succeeds in offering an account that is subtle and sophisticated even by the standards of cutting-edge metaphysics and philosophy of mind.