

## Critical Notices

### *The 'common sense' in Aristotle's theory of perception*

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#### Article text

Pavel Gregoric, *Aristotle on the Common Sense*, OUP 2007

Gregoric's book engages with Aristotle's account of how humans and animals perform a wide ranging series of perceptual functions which span: *simultaneous perception* (within one sense modality, e.g. seeing the blueness of the sky and the whiteness of the clouds, and across sense modalities, e.g. seeing the blueness of the sea and hearing the sound of the waves); *cross modal binding* (perceiving the whiteness and the sweetness of a cube of sugar); *perceptual discrimination* (within one sense modality e.g. yellow from green, and across sense modalities e.g. whiteness from sweetness); *perceptual awareness*; perception of movement, number, shape etc.; perception of a sensory quality by a sense modality different from its proper one (e.g. perceiving roughness by sight).

Far from being questions that common sense can answer, these are very challenging philosophical issues, currently at the forefront of research in contemporary philosophy of mind. Yet, for Aristotle all the above perceptual functions involve what he calls the 'common sense'. What is the Aristotelian common sense? How does it operate? How does it relate to the ordinarily recognized five senses? Is it a sixth sense, distinct from the other five?

Understanding Aristotle's views on the common sense and its operations is historically valuable, and might be fruitfully brought to bear on current discussions in the philosophy of mind. This is indeed how Gregoric motivates the investigation of Aristotle's texts he undertakes. But he also hastens to add: 'Most of my efforts will be directed at fathoming and elucidating Aristotle's views, rather than to their evaluation or placement in the context of contemporary debates' (15). As explicitly declared by the author, the book is primarily of historical and exegetical value. But since it is the only monograph and more generally one of the very few studies of a challenging topic in Aristotle, it is very important to examine whether it does indeed deliver elucidation of Aristotle's position as promised. For, the book will be for many interested in the philosophy of mind and its history the most comprehensive source of information on Aristotle's views.

Gregoric examines all the occurrences of the expression 'common sense' in Aristotle's works, and classifies them into three uses:

- i) an adjectival use which applies to one or more individual senses, indicating that they are *shared by animals of different species* (*HA* I 3, 489a17; *Met* I 1, 981b14);
- ii) an adjectival use which applies to all the individual senses, and indicates their shared sensitivity to a type of feature in the world called by Aristotle

*common perceptible*: e.g. shape, movement, number etc. (DA III 1, 425a27);

- iii) a noun-use, referring to *the common sense* (PA IV 10 686; DM 450a10; DA III 431b5)

On the basis of this very scholarly survey of the texts, Gregoric argues that not all the perceptual functions Aristotle is traditionally taken to assign to the common sense are in fact performed by it. When Aristotle says that they involve ‘common sense’, he uses the expression sometimes as a noun but sometimes as an adjectival qualification for the individual senses.

Gregoric’s main original interpretative points are two. Firstly, from the functions that are traditionally attributed to the common sense Gregoric excludes perception of the so called ‘common sensibles’ (movement, shape, number etc.) and cross modal perception. For, the expression ‘common sense’ is used only adjectivally in the pertinent contexts. Gregoric reaches his conclusion on merely textual and linguistic grounds, without pausing to examine the philosophical view he is thereby attributing to Aristotle. He claims that for Aristotle perception of the common sensibles does not require anything over and above the individual senses; it happens in virtue of the appropriate sensitivity that the individual senses share. But *how* does it happen? What is it that the individual senses share ontologically that endows them with a common function? The reader is left to wonder. And what does the required shared sensitivity consist in; is it moving colours or moving coloured objects that sight sees, and is this – can it be – the same as the sensitivity to hearing moving sounds or moving sounding objects? As for cross modal perception, Gregoric appears to have even less of an explanation to offer on behalf of Aristotle:

‘Even if we suppose for the sake of argument that cross modal perception is performed by the common sense, I do not think we should consider it a function of the common sense. Rather, it seems to be a coincidence of having a perceptual capacity of the soul which is a unity with some internal complexity’ (201).

As to the other perceptual functions at issue, Gregoric shares the traditional view according to which for Aristotle the common sense is responsible for: simultaneous perception; perceptual discrimination; activation and de-activation of all the senses in waking and sleep; and perceptual awareness (which Gregoric understands as monitoring of the activity and inactivity of the senses; this point will be granted to him here for reasons of brevity).

The second main original interpretative conclusion offered in the book is that of the aforementioned perceptual functions some pertain to the *perceptual* capacity of the soul, and some others, which require the involvement of imagination, to the *sensory* capacity of the soul. Gregoric warns us against two interpretative mistakes that he takes all commentators to have made so far. The first is to assign both types of perceptual functions (whether they involve or not imagination) to a single capacity of the soul. The second mistake traditionally made, he tells us, is to take the single capacity of the soul that supposedly performs both types of functions to be the perceptual capacity of the soul, which is what *we* (mistakenly, for him) designate as the Aristotelian notion of the common sense. But what Aristotle designates with the

noun-use of the expression 'common sense' is rather, according to Gregoric, the sensory capacity of the soul. The sensory capacity of the soul is its non-rational cognitive power and it comprises the perceptual and the imaginative capacities.

Gregoric comments thus on the results of his textual analyses:

'We should not suppose that various functions which go beyond the individual senses taken separately are achieved all by the same thing (205) ... This is a conclusion whose importance for our subject can hardly be exaggerated (204) ... This should come as a great relief to interpreters of Aristotle's notion of the common sense, because the diversity of its functions has presented them with an acute problem ... Fortunately, we do not need to saddle Aristotle with such a problem (205) ... In that way we save Aristotle from an incoherent notion of the common sense' (206).

A methodological issue first. Identifying what functions the common sense performs in order to understand what the common sense is, is certainly a move in the right direction, in keeping with Aristotle's own philosophical methodology. But it is disappointing that in describing at great length the functions of the common sense, Gregoric does not derive from the texts he analyses, nor gives us an understanding of, what is required in the make up of the common sense for it to perform these functions.

There is an air of irony in the 'fortunate' overall conclusion Gregoric considers the main achievement of his investigation. For, after the reader has gone through many and many pages of meticulous scholarship that are supposed to clear the ground from confusion and misinterpretations of Aristotle's texts, here is what there is to learn. On Gregoric's view, Aristotle's account for two out of four functions of the common sense, simultaneous perception and perceptual discrimination, is ultimately 'not satisfactory' (207), 'disappointing' (208), 'not promising' with respect to what it can do to explain cross modal binding (208). Furthermore, two other functions, namely perception of the common sensibles and cross modal perception, are not accounted for at all, as seen above.

I shall turn now to the challenge that has exercised and divided commentators since antiquity, which is how to make good philosophical sense of Aristotle's account of the metaphysical constitution of the common sense. Gregoric's proposed interpretation may be put in a nutshell thus: the common sense is a single thing, although complex. Ontologically, it is a single *unified whole* (213 et al.) Its complexity is only 'in notion': its parts are only 'conceptual, or logical parts' (25). I shall label the metaphysical account Gregoric offers for the common sense *presumed holism* (PH). It is presumed rather than explained, for it offers no answer to the following crucial questions: What is it that is unified at the ontological level if the parts are only conceptual? Is it unified or atomically one? (Atoms have properties which can be conceptually but not ontologically distinguished in the atom. Is hearing related to seeing, and both to imagination, as weight is related to size in an atom? Would we want to charge such a position to Aristotle?). Either way, how does this oneness perform the very diverse functions that the common sense performs? The PH model is not derived from the texts or from the functional requirements (unity and complexity) the common sense has to meet. Rather, it is drawn by analogy to the structure of the soul, which is treated by Gregoric as an assumption. Likewise, the

structural analogy between the soul and its lower level capacities is just assumed. In the author's words:

'I submit that the unity of the perceptual capacity of the soul is achieved in the same way in which the unity of the soul is achieved ... The soul is a single thing divided only conceptually, in the sense that we can analyse it into different parts or aspects according to the most salient activities of living beings ... however in reality there is only one soul ... which is what ensures integration and co-operation of various parts or aspects of the soul ... Likewise, only at a lower level, the perceptual capacity of the soul is one single thing divided only conceptually, in the sense that we can analyse it into different senses according to different kinds of the special perceptibles ... However, *there is really one single perceptual capacity of the soul, which ensures that it can operate not only as this or that individual sense, but also as one* (39, my emphasis).

'The soul allows only for a conceptual division, and *such a division guarantees both the unity of the soul and the unity of the living body*. Now the same sort of division can be applied at a lower level, that is, on the capacities of the soul themselves ... The perceptual part of the soul ... turns out to be itself conceptually divisible into capacities of a lower order, namely the individual senses ... *The perceptual capacity of the soul is not an aggregate of the individual senses, but a unified whole*' (27, my emphasis).

The above quotes illustrate Gregoric's position, but also bring out its inadequacies. What accounts for the unity of the common sense? Claiming only conceptual division of the soul guarantees nothing about its unity, and does not tell us anything about its oneness (*pace* Gregoric, 29), but rather demands urgently explanation of the meaningfulness of the unity presumption. Positing that the perceptual capacity is one single thing (39), and not an aggregate (of what?) (27), is not a solution, because an account of its internal constitutional complexity is still missing. Remarking that 'Aristotle's framework operates with a series of related but distinct notions' (205) does not further our understanding of the common sense's unity.

Gregoric's book is a scholarly exercise devoted to the discussion of the exegetical history of the topic rather than to the philosophical analysis and explication of Aristotle's position.

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