Aristotle on Consciousness

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Aristotle sometimes draws analogies between perceiving and thinking. One analogy, for example, concerns the relation holding between faculties and their objects. If thinking is like perceiving, then as the faculty of perception is to the object perceived, so too the faculty of thought is to the intelligible object. Of course, there are also disanalogies between perception and thought. For example, where perception requires external stimulation by sensible substances, thought does not generally require external stimulation. How far then might we push the analogy?

In this essay, I’ll argue that the role of the agent intellect in thought is analogous to the role of perceiving that we see and hear in perception.

The paper comes in two parts. In the first part, I’ll rehearse an argument for the conclusion that perceiving that we see and hear isn’t the office of a faculty separate from the special senses of seeing and hearing: rather, perceiving that we see and hear is a kind of turning of one’s attention to the affection of the sense organs.

In the second part of the essay, I’ll address the question, what light do these results in the case of perception shed on the agency of the agent intellect? Let me unpack this issue just a little. Aristotle holds that there is a passive intellect, by which the mind can become any intelligible object, and an active or agent intellect, by which the mind can make any intelligible object. Drawing the analogy with perceiving that we see and hear, I’ll argue that the agent intellect isn’t a faculty separate from the passive intellect. Rather, it’s a kind of turning of one’s attention to the intelligible objects contained in the passive intellect. The activity of the agent intellect is, for Aristotle, a kind of consciousness. The argument from an analogy between perception and thought thus provides support for a line of interpretation of the De Anima that, I’ll note, goes back to at least Franz Brentano.

Finally, let me flag here that the picture of Aristotle’s account of consciousness that emerges from the argument of this paper suggests comparison between Aristotle and a contemporary view of consciousness as a higher-order representation. I’ll later urge for caution in making this comparison.

In De An. 3.2 (425b12-25), Aristotle considers what we might call higher-order perception—perceiving that we perceive.

(a) Inasmuch as we perceive that we see and hear, it must either be by sight or by some other sense that the percipient perceives that he sees.
(b.1) But, it may be urged, the same sense that perceives sight will also perceive the color that is the object of sight. So that either there will be two senses to perceive the same thing or the one sense, sight, will perceive itself. (b.2) Further, if the sense perceiving sight were really a distinct sense, either the series would go on to infinity or some one of the series of senses would perceive itself. Therefore it will be better to admit this of the first in the series.

(c) Here, however, there is a difficulty. Assuming that to perceive by sight is to see and that it is color or that which possesses color which is seen, it may be argued that, if you are to see that which sees, that which in the first instance sees, the primary visual organ, will actually have color.

(d.1) Clearly, then, to perceive by sight does not always mean one and the same thing. For, even when we do not see, it is nevertheless by sight that we discern both darkness and light, though not in the same manner. (d.2) Further, that which sees is in a manner colored. For the sense organ is in every case receptive of the sensible object without its matter. And this is why the sensations and images remain in the sense organs even when the sensible objects are withdrawn.

Here’s an outline of this passage. In (a), Aristotle raises a question for an account of perceiving that we see: is this higher-order perception the office of sight or another faculty? In (b.1) and (b.2), he gives two arguments against the latter claim. In (c), he raises a problem for the former claim; and in (d.1) and (d.2), he offers two solutions to this problem. The conclusion is that perceiving that we see is the office of sight.

There are a lot of difficulties for interpreting this passage, but I want to focus on one of the two arguments given against the claim that the perception that we see is the office of a faculty distinct from sight. The argument of (b.1) rests on the assumption that whatever faculty perceives a special sense must also perceive the object of that sense: in the case of sight, color. This grounds an argument against there being a separate sense for second-order perceptions since it violates the thesis, advanced in *De An.* 3.1, that for any type of sense object—such as color—there’s at most one sense.4

At first blush, this argument isn’t persuasive. For there seems to be no reason to hold the assumption on which it rests. Suppose that our bodies were so wired that whenever we see, we emitted a low humming sound. Then we could hear that we see without of course hearing colors. A faculty of higher order perception could operate analogously—although not, of course, by means of one of the special senses such as hearing. That is, even if we concede that the cognitive activity in question is a kind of perception, there is still no reason to think it is the office of the same perceptual faculty as the faculty whose activity is being perceived.

Let me make a proposal. The difficulties which we have found in this argument rest on the mistaken assumption that Aristotle’s claim is that perceiving that we see and hear is a *special case* of perception—as though, in addition to cases of normal perception
such as seeing and hearing, we sometimes cognize that we are seeing and hearing; and Aristotle is making the implausible claim that such cognition is also a kind of perception.

I'll suggest an alternative interpretation of Aristotle's claim. Perceiving that we see and hear is not a special case of perception but is rather a necessary condition for any ordinary perception whatsoever. In what follows, I'll argue that this interpretation offers several advantages over the special-case interpretation: it makes better sense of both the place of the argument of our passage, 425b12-25, within the line of argument from 2.12 to the end of 3.2, and the details of the arguments within the passage as well.

Notice that if Aristotle's claim was that perceiving that we see and hear is a special case of perception, then the first half of De An. 3.2 (425b12-26a26) would be nothing more than an aside without relation to the discussions that precede or follow it. On the other hand, taking Aristotle's claim to be that perceiving that we see and hear is a necessary condition for perception fits this section within a continuous line of argument from 2.12 to the end of 3.2. The argument prior to 2.12 presents a partial account of perception as a continuous affection linking sense object with sense organ by means of a sense medium (metaxu: literally, a continuity). What the colored object excites is neither the sensitive faculty nor the sense object directly but is rather the medium of sight, the transparent. It is this, the continuous transparent, which, excited by the sense object, in turn excites the sense organ. So sight takes place through an affection of the sensitive faculty not by the color itself but by a medium.

De An. 2.12 then raises the question, why does the media of perception not itself perceive? The media would perceive if being affected in a certain way were a sufficient condition for perception. For both the media and the sense organ are excited or affected in similar ways. The question, posed at 424b16-17, is: "What then is smelling, besides a sort of suffering or being acted upon?" I take it that this question is not rhetorical. That is, Aristotle's claim is not that smelling is just a sort of suffering or being acting upon. Rather, the preceding discussion has shown that being affected in a certain way is a necessary but insufficient condition for perception. The question now at hand is: what else is required to provide a sufficient condition for perception?

By 425b12, Aristotle has concluded that the component of perception, in addition to a certain kind of affection, is perceiving that we see and hear. The argument of 425b12-25 does not defend this thesis but addresses a question that subsequently arises: is such perception the office of a special faculty? Before turning to this question, what more can be said of perceiving that we see and hear beyond the claim that such activity is a necessary condition for perception?

Aryeh Kosman argues that perceiving that we see and hear is, in Aristotle, what Kosman calls 'apperceptive awareness'. He (1969, 508) writes that "to perceive ... is not simply to be affected but to perceive that one is affected." And he continues that perception is thus "affection of which the living organism is conscious." I find this suggestion attractive, but in speaking of consciousness, we need to proceed carefully.

If perceiving that we see and hear is a kind of consciousness, then it resembles the contemporary view of consciousness as a higher-order perception. Under this view, phenomenally conscious experience requires the subject's awareness of a state; and such
awareness consists in the subject representing that state itself. Aristotle’s use of indirect discourse, the ‘that’-clause, suggests that he views perceiving that we see and hear as an awareness of a representation of the subject’s own state. But here’s one reason why such comparisons between Aristotle and contemporary views could mislead. Such views are typically put to the end of providing a reductive analysis of the subjective nature of experience—an explanation of what it’s like to perceive. Aristotle’s aim is rather to distinguish a mode of life, one special kind of motion, from the physiological changes found in the sense organs and media.

I hold that perceiving that we see and hear is, simply, a turning of one’s attention to the affection of the sense organs. What I mean by attention here is a prosaic and common phenomenon. We can, for example, attend to some item in our visual field while ignoring other items; when we suddenly notice what was previously unnoticed, it often comes as something of a surprise. Compare suddenly noticing background noise. Our sense organs are certainly affected by all items in our visual or aural fields. But if we do not attend to an item, we do not, properly speaking, perceive it—in some fairly chunky but not uncommon sense of ‘perceive’. This is, I suggest, Aristotle’s intended notion when he speaks of perceiving that we see and hear.

Taking Aristotle’s claim in this way also makes the arguments within 425b12-25 intelligible. Recall that the difficulty canvassed in (b.1) rests on the assumption that whatever faculty perceives a special sense must also perceive the object of that sense. On the interpretation that perceiving that we see and hear is a special case of perception, this assumption is implausible, as I argued above. However, if perceiving that we see and hear is a kind of awareness of, or turning of one’s attention towards, the affection of the sense organ caused, through the medium, by the sense object, then the assumption is plausible. For such attention might plausibly be called both a perception of the seeing, say, and a perception of the object so seen.

So here’s the story so far. I’ve argued that viewing the perception that we see and hear as both a necessary condition of perception and as a kind of attention or consciousness makes better sense both of the place of the argument of 425b12-25 within the line of argument from 2.12 to the middle of 3.2 and of the details of the arguments within 425b12-15. The claim that such attention is not the office of some faculty other than the faculties of the special senses follows immediately.

II

I turn to Aristotle’s account of the agent intellect in De An. 3.5. As I said in the introduction to this essay, I will be concerned in this section of the essay with the question, is the role of the agent intellect in intellection analogous to the role of perceiving that we see and hear in perception? The analogy suggests all of the following: that the activity of the agent intellect is not a special case of intellection but rather a necessary condition for any intellection; that this activity is not the office of a faculty separate from the potential intellect; and that it is a kind of turning of one’s attention to
the *noeta* or intelligible objects possessed by the potential intellect. I find these theses attractive for the simplicity and elegance with which they account for what little textual data *De An.* 3.5 and 3.8 gives us. Moreover, they portray Aristotle as giving a reasonable, if sketchy, account of concept acquisition and employment. But they are controversial claims. The agent intellect is generally taken to be a faculty separate from the potential intellect. So we need to go carefully through this material.

Aristotle apparently introduces a distinction between the so-called potential intellect and the so-called agent or active intellect at *De An.* 3.5 (430a10-17):

> But since, as in the whole of nature, to something which serves as matter for each kind (and this is potentially all the members of the kind) there corresponds something else which is the cause or agent because it makes them all, the two being related to one another as art to its material, of necessity these differences must be found also in the soul. And to the one intellect, which answers to this description because it becomes all things, corresponds the other because it makes all things, like a sort of definite quality such as light. For in a manner light, too, converts colors which are potential into actual colors.

There is a danger of misinterpretation here which is analogous with the misinterpretation I warned the reader against in the first section of this essay. There, recall, the misinterpretation was that of viewing perceiving that we see and hear as a special case of perception instead of a necessary condition for perception. Here, one might view the activity of the agent intellect as a special case of intellection. The view would be spelt out as follows. When in the presence of a particular substance, our intellects may enter into formal identity with the intelligible form which makes that substance the sort of thing it is: it is in this sense, according to this view, that our minds can become all things—or rather, can become all intelligible forms. But, the view would continue, in addition to this cognitive ability, our intellects have the capacity to enter into formal identity with intelligible forms even in the absence of a particular substance instantiating that form: it is in this sense that our minds can make all things.

Before expounding an interpretation of the agent intellect, I’ll note one more challenge for any view that the so-called potential and agent intellects are different faculties. I’ve argued that the discussion of the so-called passive and agent intellects describes a passage from the first potentiality to the first actuality of intellection: describing, that is to say, both the agent’s acquisition of a capacity to entertain a certain kind of object of cognition and his execution of just this capacity. It is, then, a single kind of object of cognition that is the object of both the so-called passive and agent intellects. This causes a problem for any interpretation that claims that the passive and agent intellects are different faculties. Aristotle seems to hold the thesis that to each kind of object of cognition there corresponds one and only one faculty. If Aristotle does indeed hold this thesis, then this establishes a condition of adequacy for any interpretation of Aristotle’s view of intellection: the interpretation must be consistent with this thesis. The interpretation of the agent intellect which I am advocating meets this condition, as will become clearer in just a minute.
The picture just sketched fails to meet this condition. The distinction of the intellect becoming all things and making all things is not describing two different activities both of which are thinking but is rather describing two different kinds of activities only one of which is actually thinking. In particular, I hold that Aristotle’s discussion of the intellect becoming all things concerns a passage from the first potentiality to the first actuality of intellection; the discussion of the intellect making all things concerns the passage from the second potentiality to the second actuality of intellection. This will suggest that the relation holding between the agent and the passive intellect is analogous to the relation holding between the perception that we perceive and the special senses.

Explicating this distinction among potentiality and actualities will require a brief excursus into Aristotle’s discussion, in De An. 2.5, of the question, why there is no sensation of the senses themselves? That is, why do they produce no sensation (aisthesin) apart from external sensible objects? The answer is that the external stimulation of the sense organs is a necessary condition for perception or, more precisely, the passage from the first actuality of perception, the aisthetikon, to the second actuality of perception, aisthanesthai.

Aristotle has a tripartite division of stages of actualization. One may have the potential to acquire a capacity; this is first potentiality. One may, having actualized this potential, possess a capacity; this is first actuality (also called second potentiality). One may exercise this capacity; this is second actuality. Aristotle’s favorite illustration of these distinctions is the acquisition, possession and exercise of knowledge. For example, a child is born with the first potentiality to learn a language; in passing from first potentiality to first actuality, the child, being instructed, acquires the linguistic skills required to be a competent speaker of that language; in passing from first actuality to second actuality, the competent speaker employs these skills—she speaks (or understands the speech of another). The first passage, from first potentiality to first actuality, is a kind of alteration (alloiosis) and, in the case of the acquisition of knowledge, requires external causation in the form of instruction.

The second passage, from first actuality to second actuality, is not an alteration and, in the case of the exercise of knowledge, does not require external stimulation. It is tempting to say that the passage from first actuality to second actuality, in the case of perception, also does not require external stimulation but this is a disanalogy with the case of knowledge. Although the passage from first actuality to second actuality does not generally require external stimulation, in the case of perception this is required. I take it that this is part of the argumentative purpose of 2.5: external stimulation of the sense organs is a necessary condition of perception despite it being a passage from first actuality to second actuality.

With this set-up in the background, I’ll now argue that the description of the intellect becoming all things in De An. 3.4 describes the passage from first potentiality to first actuality. Thus this, the actuality of the so-called potential intellect, is a necessary precondition for thinking but is also an insufficient condition for thinking. Then I will argue that the description of the intellect as making all things in De An. 3.5 describes the passage from first to second actuality.
De An. 3.4 (429a18-24) opens with a description of the first potentiality of intellect as a kind of nothingness:

The mind ... since it thinks all things, must needs, in the words of Anaxagoras, be unmixed with any, if it is to rule, that is, to know. For by intruding its own form it hinders and obstructs that which is alien to it; hence it has no other nature than this, that it is a capacity. Thus, then, the part of the soul which we call intellect ... is nothing at all actually before it thinks. [Italics mine]

The notion of capacity employed here is capacity in the sense of first potentiality; and the notion of thinking here is the second potentiality or first actuality of the intellect. This is made clearer later in the chapter, as Aristotle proceeds, at 429b5-9, to describe the result of this thinking:

when the intellect has thus become everything in the sense in which one who actually is a scholar is said to be so (which happens so soon as he can exercise his power of himself), even then it is still in one sense but a capacity: not, however, a capacity in the same sense as before it learned or discovered.

The intellect that thinks is nonetheless a capacity; and reference is made to Aristotle's example of second potentiality as the possession of knowledge. Clearly, Aristotle is describing a passage from first potentiality to second potentiality.

I turn to the passage from the second potentiality to the second actuality of intellect. Now, on the view that the activity of the agent intellect is a special case of intellection, the discussion of the agent intellect in 3.5 is an aside without relation to what precedes it. Viewing the activity of the agent intellect as a necessary condition for thinking places the discussion in 3.5 within a continuous line of argument. I have noted that De An. 3.4 describes an intellect that becomes all things. The question arises, once the intellect has become all things, why does the intellect not always think all things? That is to say, the sense in which the intellect becomes all things describes a necessary but insufficient condition for thinking; if the account in 3.4 were describing a sufficient condition for thinking, then the intellect which becomes all things would think always all things. There must be another component to thinking: this is the contribution made by the agent intellect.

I've argued that the agency of the agent intellect is a necessary condition for the second actuality of intellection. I turn now to the question: What does the agent intellect do? The analogies with perceiving that we see and hear, which I've already established, are suggestive. Is the agency of the agent intellect a kind of attention or consciousness? On this picture, the thinker acquires the capacity to entertain a particular object of thought through the process of concept acquisition described in De An. 3.4. However, to possess object of thought in this manner is not to be continuously thinking. Just as we may have sensible forms in our visual field, which we do not perceive until we attend to them, so too we have intelligible forms in our intellects of which we do not always think. Actual
thinking happens when the thinker turns his attention to one of the intelligible forms within his conceptual resources.  

Let me bring the paper to a close. I’ve advocated an interpretation of the active intellect as a kind of attention or consciousness. The interpretation has several virtues. First, it maintains an analogy between perception and thought (provided the interpretation of perceiving that we see and hear canvassed in the first section is correct). Second, it’s adequate to Aristotle’s thesis that to each kind of object of cognition there corresponds one and only one faculty: the interpretation thus avoids the difficulties which face any view positing distinct faculties for the potential and active intellects.

1 This analogy is suggested by De An. 3.4 (429a13-18).
2 All translations of De An. are from Hicks (1907) except where noted.
3 There are difficulties with each stage of the argument. Consider first section (a). What cognitive activity is being described as perceiving that one sees or hears? And why is this form of cognition called perception? Unlike the other modes of perception, the object of such cognition is not a sensible object, an aistheton, but an activity, an aisthanesthai. This raises a problem for the following reason. The objects of perception are not generally truth bearers. Truth and falsity for Aristotle imply the combination and separation of what Aristotle, conflating propositional constituents and their expressions in language, calls names and verbs. In De Interpretatione 1 (16a13-15), Aristotle gives the example of a sensible quality, expressed by “white”, which is neither true nor false. Aristotle sometimes speaks more loosely of perceptions being true. For example, at De An. 3.3, Aristotle claims that perceptions of the special senses (ton idion) are true or least subject to error. However, the sense in which perceptions are true is not that they imply combination and separation but that one cannot be in error that he is, say, seeing red. But the expression, “perceive that (hoti) I see and hear,” used at 425b12, suggests that the objects of such perception are truth bearers: they are the combination of a name and a verb. If cognitions of sensible objects are non-veridical but cognitions of acts of perceiving are veridical, then the grouping together of both kinds of cognition under the label, “perception,” seems strained.

The arguments in support of the claim that we perceive that we see by means of sight are no more lucid. The stated problem is that, since the object of sight is color, if we perceive that we see by means of sight, then what we perceive in this higher-order perception, the sense organ, will be colored. However, the problem rests on the seemingly false assumption that we can perceive that we see only if we perceive that which sees, the sense organ. Let us for the moment accept this assumption. I speculate that the difficulty, which Aristotle is briefly canvassing here, is that the color of the eye doesn’t appear to be dependent on the color of what is seen: pace Crystal Gayle, nothing seems to turn your brown eyes blue. If the assumption that we can perceive that we see only if we perceive
the sense organ is true, then this apparent indifference of the cornea to the sense object is indeed problematic.

What counterarguments does Aristotle offer? The response of (d.1) is that perception by sight is not one thing. The difficulty with interpreting this argument is to understand its relevance to the problem of (c). Hamlyn (1968, 122) also questions the relevance of this move, writing that "perception by sight might be multifarious, as he indicates by the case of judging darkness and light, but not necessarily in the right respect." That it is by sight that we perceive darkness and light may show that perception by sight is not one thing. But it is fallacious to infer from this that it is by sight that we perceive that we see. At best, (d.1) opens the possibility of giving an argument for this conclusion. Section (d.2) gives just this argument. Despite appearances, the color of the sense organ is in a manner dependent on the color of what is seen. I will not enter into the well-worn controversy regarding in what manner the sense organ takes on the color of the sense object—i.e., whether there is a physiological change in the organ. Of course, the sense organ proper is not the eye but the jelly inside the eye. So the fact that the cornea doesn't change color with what is seen does not refute the claim. This explanation of these arguments makes some sense of (c)-(d), but only under the seemingly false assumption that we can perceive that we see only if we perceive that which sees, the sense organ. So we have yet to clarify any section of the passage.

4 Hamlyn (1968, 121) seems to fail to notice this, writing only that "the possibility that we know that we see by means of a different sense ... would mean that the object of sight, color, would be an object of this sense too, which goes against the whole notion of an object of sense."

5 I owe this example to L.A. Kosman (1969), who uses it to illustrate a somewhat different point.

6 Hamlyn (1968, 122) rightly criticizes this assumption but, I believe, for the wrong reason. He writes that "one can be aware that one is seeing without being aware of what one is seeing." Perhaps Hamlyn is thinking of such a case as viewing something in the distance and not knowing what object, a man or a scarecrow, say, it is that one is seeing. However, it is not the office of sight to judge that the color seen is the attribute of a man and not the attribute of a scarecrow. On the other hand, if Hamlyn is claiming that one can be aware that one is seeing a color without being aware of what color one is seeing, then Hamlyn is mistaken.

7 The argument of (b.2) seems just as weak. The danger of an infinite regress depends upon the assumption that in order for a distinct sense to perceive any perception of order n by means of an (n+1)-order perception, there must be a further sense to perceive the (n+1)-order perception by means of an (n+2)-order perception. So for a distinct sense to perceive a special sense such as sight, there must be a further sense to perceive the second-order perception with a third-order perception, and so on. But this assumption seems clearly false. Why could a distinct sense not perceive a special sense such as sight without there being the further need for a perception of this second-order perception?
Notice, it is not just the distal senses that require a medium: at 2.11, Aristotle argues that flesh is the medium, not the organ, of touch.

See, for example, Rosenthal 1993 and Carruthers 2000.

For the modern locus classicus for the subjective nature of experience, see Nagel 1974.

One might hold that we can perceive an item unawares. The distinction I am drawing here between perceiving awares and perceiving unawares is similar (modulo the comments below on misreading Aristotle as advocating the contemporary notion of consciousness) to that drawn—for example, by Block (1995) and Tye (1995)—between perceptual consciousness with access-consciousness and perceptual consciousness without access-consciousness. Such perception would, of course, provide no basis for our beliefs or actions.

Contemporary higher-order theorists of consciousness draw on similar examples of nonconscious perceptual states. See Armstrong 1968 for the case of absent-minded driving; and Carruthers 1996 for the case of blindsight.

Kosman (1969) does not put the point in the way I have but, if I am reading him right, he would agree with two major claims made in this section of the essay: first, that perceiving that we see and hear is not a special case of perception but is rather a necessary condition for any perception; and second, that such perception is not the office of a special faculty. It is not clear to me whether Kosman would agree or disagree with my further claim that perceiving that we see and hear is not a manifestation of a contemporary notion of consciousness.

The parts of the passage I labeled (a) and (c) are also clearer. First, recall that if Aristotle’s claim were that perceiving that we see and hear is a special kind of perception, it would be entirely unclear why Aristotle would describe such cognition as a kind of perception at all: for the object of such awareness would not be a sensible object, an aistheton, but an activity, an aisthanesthai. The awkwardness of this terminology dissipates if we view perceiving that we see and hear as a necessary condition for perception. And not only is it now natural to call this kind of cognition “perception,” but to do so does not commit us to the thesis that the objects of such perception are truth bearers. Recall, the problem here is that the expression, “perceive that (hoti) I see and hear,” used at 425b12, perhaps suggests that the objects of such perception are truth bearers. But if perceiving that we see and hear is simply a turning of one’s attention to the affection of the sense organs, then no combination of propositional components is entailed by the activity. Moreover, Aristotle sometimes uses expressions that do not employ ‘that’-clauses. At 425b15-16, for example, he calls this kind of cognition a perceiving of sight (he tes opseos aisthesis).

Finally, recall that the problem canvassed at (c) rests on the assumption that perceiving that we see and hear requires that we perceive the relevant sense organ. If perceiving that we see and hear were a special case of perception, there would be no reason to hold this assumption. However, suppose instead that perceiving that we see and hear is a kind of
turning of one's attention towards the affection of the sense organ by the relevant medium. Then such perception is, in some sense, a perception of the organ.

This concludes my argument that the interpretation of perceiving that we see and hear as a kind of attention provides a better reading of 425b12-25. Notice, for making sense of (b.1) and (c), we require the intermediately strong interpretation of perceiving that we see and hear as a kind of attention: the weaker claim that perceiving that we see and hear is a necessary condition for perception would not be enough to render the respective assumptions plausible; and, on the other hand, the richer interpretation of perceiving that we see and hear as a kind of awareness is not required to make these assumptions plausible.

Next, notice that the argument of (b.2) is now not only intelligible but compelling. Our problem in understanding this passage lay in the assumption that a distinct sense could not perceive a special sense such as sight without there being a need for a further perception of this second-order perception. This assumption generated an infinite regress. For a distinct sense to perceive sight, there must be a further sense to perceive the second-order perception with a third-order perception, and so on. If perceiving that we see and hear were a special case of perception, there would be no reason to hold the assumption. But the assumption is plausible when we realize that perceiving that we see and hear is a necessary condition for any perception. Then if perceiving sight were not the office of the faculty of sight itself, there would be a further need to posit a third-order perception of the second order perception.

I will now sketch an account of common sense. For I have endorsed a reading of De An. 3.2 on which perceiving that we see and hear is not the office of a special faculty, and one might hold instead that it is the office of the common sense. The alternative is that the common sense is the faculty of perceiving that the objects of the special senses are the properties of the same substance and of perceiving the common attributes (koina) such as magnitude and motion. Cf. De An. 3.3. The faculty of the common sense discriminates between two special sensations such as white and sweet. I take it that the argumentative purpose of this second half of 3.2 is just this: the common sense is not a faculty of perceiving that we see and hear, despite some initial plausibility for this thesis. This, then, is the reason why a discussion of common sense is coupled with a discussion of perceiving that we see and hear: not because of their similarity of cognitive role but because of their dissimilarity of cognitive role.

Indeed, the medieval debates on Aristotelian psychology presuppose that the agent and potential intellects are separate faculties: the debate might be briefly characterized as identifying the distinguishing mark between the two faculties: whether the relevant distinction is that between materiality and immateriality, humanity and divinity, or substantiality and nonsubstantiality.

See De An. 3.1 (425a11-13): “and thus, unless there exists some unknown body or some property different from any possessed by any of the bodies within our experience, there can be no sixth sense which we lack.” There are reasons, however, to hesitate in
ascribing this thesis to Aristotle: the passage makes a claim about a state, an *aisthesis*, not a faculty, an *aisthetikon*; moreover, the claim made in the passage may only apply to objects of perception.

18 I do not claim that a two-faculty view of intellection cannot meet this condition but, given the *prima facie* difficulty, the burden of proof is clearly on the advocate of the view.

19 412a10 suggests calling this stage first actuality since it is the actualization of first potential; 417a21ff. suggests calling this stage second potentiality since second actuality is its actualization.

20 I won’t enter into the controversy of interpreting the hindrance argument given here.

21 I’ll provide negative support for this claim by noting that a passage that may seem to refute my claim does not do so. Hicks’ translation misleadingly contributes to the appearance of the as being between two faculties. Hicks translates: “and to the one intellect (*ho men toioutos nous*), which answers to this description because it becomes all things, corresponds the other (*ho de*) because it makes all things.” However, instead of taking *toioutos* as adjectively modifying *nous*, we might just as naturally take it as a substantive. Then the passage reads: there is some aspect by which intellect becomes all things and another aspect by which (the one and the same) intellect makes all things. Since the Greek supports either reading, this passage fails to provide evidence against the claim that the so-called agent intellect is not a separate faculty.

In his commentary on this passage, Hicks (1906, 500) notes the possibility of two readings and their significance for the interpretation of the distinction. However, Hicks analyses the possibilities, both philological and philosophical, somewhat differently than as I have in the body of the essay. Hicks takes *toioutos* to be predicative and standing for both “passive” with *ho men* and “active” with *ho de*. He here translates the passage as: “the one intellect is passive, like matter, in that it becomes all objects, the other intellect is active, like the efficient cause, in that it makes all objects.” (I’ll ignore the unhappy translation of *panta* as “all objects”.) Hicks continues: “If *toioutos* were attribute and not predicate, *estin* must mean ‘there exists’ and the sense must be ‘passive intellect exists in so far as it becomes all objects, active intellect, in so far as it makes all objects.’ Those who press this interpretation deny that A[ristotle] ever really taught the existence of two distinct intellects in the senses in which the art which constructs is distinct from the material which it works upon: they content that A[ristotle]’s one intellect is sometimes passive, sometimes active, as it is sometimes *theoretikos*, sometimes *praktikos*.” I have offered a somewhat different reading of the Greek and a different claim about the unity of the intellect. In particular, I claim neither that the distinction is temporal nor that it is related to the distinction of theoretical and practical reasoning.

22 I don’t claim any originality for this thesis. For antecedents, see Brentano (1867: 322) and Kosman (1992: 355). Neither do I claim, however, that Brentano or Kosman would agree with the line of argumentation of the paper.
Although there is perhaps little textual support for this interpretation, neither is there any evidence against the view—a claim that I will now make plausible. I have argued that the agency of the agent intellect is analogous to the agency of the perceiving that we see and hear. If this claim is true, then one might expect Aristotle to draw this analogy explicitly: the activity of the agent intellect is to intellection as perceiving that we see and hear is to perception. What seems, at first blush, to be the strongest evidence against this claim is that, given the opportunity to draw an analogy with the agent intellect, Aristotle does not mention perceiving that we see and hear. On the contrary, the analogy drawn in De An. 3.5 (430a10-17) is between the agency of the agent intellect and light. What I will argue now is that when we understand the context and purpose of this passage, it will be clear that it does not provide evidence against the claim that the agency of the agent intellect is a kind of attention.

The difficulty of interpreting the analogy between the agent intellect and light is understanding what is the second term of each pair: to what is it that light stands in relation and to what is it that the agent intellect stands in relation, such that these two relations are analogous? And: why does perceiving that we see and hear not stand in this relation? Notice this disanalogy between perceiving that we see and hear and the agent intellect. The agency of the agent intellect is a sufficient condition for the intelligible forms, once possessed by the passive intellect, to be actually thought. That is to say, it is a sufficient condition for the passage from the first actuality to the second actuality of intellection. Perceiving that we see and hear, however, is a necessary but insufficient condition for the sensible forms to be actually perceived: external stimulation of the sense organs is also required to effect the passage from the first actuality to the second actuality of perception. On the other hand, light is a necessary and sufficient condition for the visibility of color. Light is the presence of something fiery in the transparent air or water that allows the air or water to mediate—and so be actually transparent—between the color, the horaton, and the sense organ, the aisthetikon of sight. See 2.7 (418a26-b17). This, then, is the analogy being drawn in this passage: light is to color becoming perceptible as the agent intellect is to the intelligible forms, possessed by the potential intellect, becoming actually thought. The analogy with light is appropriate in this context. Although, I maintain, both perceiving that we see and hear and the agency of the agent intellect are kinds of attention, to draw an analogy with perceiving that we see and hear in this context would be misleading.

I have also argued in the endnotes that what may appear, at first blush, to provide evidence against the view does not disprove the interpretation. This has, I hope, made the view plausible.

Works Cited


Rosenthal 1993 Thinking that One Thinks, in Martin Davies and Glyn W. Humphries (eds.), *Consciousness*, Blackwell.