

Burnyeat on Spiritual Change

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In a series of influential articles, Myles Burnyeat has argued that Aristotle's metaphysics of mind is incompatible with modern versions of physicalism. In particular, and contrary to earlier work by people like Richard Sorabji, he contends that for Aristotle there are no physiological changes that occur when we perceive. But this leaves Burnyeat in a difficult position, for there are many points throughout the psychological works where Aristotle describes the senses as dependent on their sense-organs, and, more dangerously, Aristotle seems at times to describe physiological changes that are at the very least correlated with token acts of perception. While Burnyeat and other "spiritualists" (as defenders of this position have come to be called) have successfully shown that it is possible to reinterpret all of the passages that support the second claim, the most straightforward reading continues to be incompatible with spiritualism, and Aristotle's appeal to the organ and medium when describing the senses does suggest that he has a general sensibility that corresponds with that of the modern physicalist. In this paper, I contend that the spiritualist view as Burnyeat presents it is needlessly strong. The references to occurrent physiological changes that Burnyeat rejects are shown on their natural reading to imply only that there are physiological alterations that coincide with acts of perception. I further argue that the position I ascribe to Aristotle, wherein acts of perception supervene on physiological changes but are in no way constituted by them, is similar to spiritualism in that it denies that perception is ontologically reducible to something physical. Nonetheless, I claim, contrary to Burnyeat's conclusion, this more nuanced reading of Aristotle is not rendered otiose by the advancement of physical explanation in the sciences, for while Aristotle's view does not imply that success, it is nonetheless compatible with it.