

The Breadth of Common-Sensing in Aristotle

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In his interpretation of Aristotle, D.W. Hamlyn thinks that we ought to wrest apart the faculty responsible for perception of the common-objects from that responsible for sophisticated perceptual capacities like joint perception and perceptual discrimination. In this paper, I argue that such a reading is inconsistent with Aristotle's remarks in *De Memoria* 1 that unite perception of time, magnitude, and change with the faculty that underpins the production of images. I address Pavel Gregoric's 2007 interpretation, which is continuous with Hamlyn's, and show that it cannot motivate the apparent continuity found within the passage. It is thus shown that the traditional interpretation is preferable, and that despite their apparent differences, Aristotle understands all of these perceptual abilities as sharing an explanation in terms of the common-sense.

Since David Hamlyn's 1968 article on the common-sense, the breadth of its functions has become the subject of controversy.¹ W.D. Ross, following orthodoxy, thinks that it underpins all perceptual powers that go beyond the reception of the special sensibles by their respective senses. His list includes: "(1) the perception of the 'common sensibles'; (2) the perception of the 'incidental sensibles'; (3) the perception that we are perceiving; (4) discrimination between the objects of different senses; (5) ... the inactivity of all the senses which is found in sleep."² Hamlyn, on the other hand, argues that the common-sense is responsible only for the first function mentioned above, viz. the perception of the common sensibles. He observes that the phrase '*koinê aisthêsis*' rarely appears in Aristotle.³ The *locus classicus*, at *DA* III.1

¹ See also Block [1961]. The common-sense is not, of course, a sixth sense, and its use in what follows should not be understood as implying a distinct sense.

² Ross [1955], 35.

³ Hamlyn [1968] observes three technical uses: *DA* 425A27; *DM* 450a10; and *PA* 686a27. Gregoric [2007], Part II, goes through every use of the two terms in the same sentence. He finds six such cases

425a27, ascribes in-itself (*kath' hauto*) perception of the common sensibles (*ta koina*) to the common-sense. The phrase also appears at *DM* 1 450a9-14, but the passages that discuss the other four supposed functions employ different phrases, including: ‘common potentiality’ (*koinê dunamis*),⁴ ‘primary sense faculty’ (*prôton aisthêtikon*),⁵ and ‘the sense faculty of all things’ (*aisthêtikon pantôn*).⁶ Hamlyn uses this linguistic variability to argue that the latter terms do not pick out the same capacity as that referred to in *DA* III.1. Accordingly, he denies that there is a common account of all these disparate functions.

In a recent [2007] monograph on the common-sense, Pavel Gregoric takes a similar line. He argues that *koinê aisthêsis* should not be read as a technical term picking out an array of sophisticated perceptual capacities. Instead, he says, *koinê aisthêsis* in *DA* III.1 would be better translated as a common “sensibility” or “sensitivity”: the perception of the common-objects is actually accomplished by the special senses themselves, independently of each other and of the sense faculty as a united whole.⁷ Unlike Hamlyn, however, he develops an account of the other functions adduced by Ross, according to which all of those share an explanation in terms of the united operation of the perceptual and imaginative capacities.

where most commentators find three or four. One (*DA* 431b5) is in a possibly corrupted passage, and there are good reasons for ignoring the other two (*HA* I.3 489a17 and *Meta.* I.1 981b14). As Gregoric himself notes (64-65), both passages discuss senses that are common to different creatures, not capacities that are common to the senses of a numerically single creature.

⁴ *DSV* 2 455a16.

⁵ *DMR* 1 450a11-12.

⁶ *DS* 7 449a17-18.

⁷ Hamlyn says much the same thing, see [1968], 206-7.

In this paper, I argue against any interpretation that attempts to wrest apart the perception of the common-objects from these other sophisticated perceptual capacities. I focus in what follows on the *De Memoria* passage mentioned above, which seems to employ *koinê aisthêsis* continuously from its role in perceiving the common-objects to its (purported) role in imagination. Since Gregoric has a focused discussion of the *DM* passage as it relates to the “separate powers” interpretation, I look in detail at his reading. Specifically, I show that his account is inconsistent with the text, and this is so because the argument there should be read straightforwardly as assuming the unity of those two functions. There is no reason, I conclude, to follow Hamlyn and Gregoric, and much reason not to.

First, the passage:

But magnitude and change must be grasped by [the same faculty] as time, so it is clear that knowledge [of them] is by the primary [faculty of] sense. But memory, even that of the intelligible objects, is not without an image (*phantasmatos*), and an image is an affection of the common-sense, so that though [memory] is coincidentally [an act] of mind, it is in-itself [an act] of the primary sense faculty.⁸

In this opening section of *DM*, Aristotle is trying to show that the ability to remember does not require the ability to reason. This is important for familiar reasons: he does not want to preclude non-human animals from remembering. The argument that memory only requires a perceptual capacity reaches its conclusion in the last line of the above passage: while in creatures like us reason can play a role in remembering, its role is coincidental to the remembering.

⁸ My translation, following Ross [1955].

It is clear that awareness of time (specifically, a previous time) is the distinguishing characteristic of memory. Thus, the argument for the conclusion that memory is a function of the perceptual capacity turns on establishing that our awareness of time is perceptually-based. It is that fact which Aristotle seeks to establish at the beginning of the passage. He demonstrates perception's role in the awareness of time by calling attention to the similarities among magnitude, change, and time. Since awareness of the first two properties is accomplished by the primary faculty of perception, he says, we must be aware of time in the same way.

Aristotle explicitly refers to *De Anima* just before this passage (449b30-31), so there can be little doubt that the "primary faculty" is the same as the faculty responsible for the perception of magnitude and change in *DA* III.1. He there uses '*koinê aisthêsis*,' which he here employs to name the faculty within which images reside. A straightforward reading of this passage, then, takes it that the subject matter does not change: the primary faculty that perceives magnitude, change, and time is the same as the common-sense that is said to be the seat of the imagination. But if that is so, we have clear evidence, contrary to Hamlyn's view, for thinking that Aristotle understands these functions as sharing an explanation.

In his discussion of this passage, Gregoric presents what he calls the 'standard interpretation,' which follows along the lines of my reading sketched above. He then gives objections meant to show that such a reading is untenable, and later develops his own interpretation, consistent with the separate powers view.

Gregoric's first problem with the traditional reading is that it entails a commitment to the claim that time is a common-object. He says that time 'does not seem to be' a common-object because it 'is not the sort of thing that is perceived in itself.'⁹ As support for this claim, he cites Charles Kahn's assertion that 'if a property is to be a common sensible as defined in *De An.* II.6, it must first be the object of at least two special senses. ... Time, however, is not directly perceived by any external sense, much less by more than one.'¹⁰ But plenty of commentators have explicitly adopted the view that time is a common-object, and they have done so in full knowledge of what it means to be such. While it is of course true that Aristotle does not list time in *DA* III.1, there is no obvious basis for Kahn's claim that it is not perceptible. The nature of time is parasitic for Aristotle on that of magnitude and change,¹¹ so how is it that I do not see time when I see change? And don't I hear the passage of time as a plane loudly passes overhead? It is certainly true that I can never observe *just* time, but the same is true of all common-objects, and, indeed, all special-objects. After all, I can't observe just magnitude without some color or other, and vice versa.

But since Gregoric thinks that perception of the common-objects does not share an explanation with imagination, he is forced to deny that Aristotle here ascribes grasp of time to the *koinê aisthêsis* of *DA* III.1, which leaves it unclear why he would mention magnitude and change in this context. He attempts to explain the reference

⁹ Gregoric [2007], 104.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, Kahn [1975], 8n23.

¹¹ See *Phys.* IV.10-14.

by adopting a different text of the passage from the one I use, and by focusing his attention on the precise phrasing that Aristotle employs. First, his translation, based on the traditional manuscript (I have italicized the passage that he locates differently):

But it is necessary to grasp magnitude and change by the same thing as time, *and the image is an affection of the common sense*; so it is clear that the grasp of these is due to the primary perceptual capacity of the soul; and memory, including that of objects of thought, is not without an image; hence memory will belong to the thinking capacity of the soul accidentally, but properly to the primary perceptual capacity of the soul.

Then he notes:

Observe that Aristotle does not exactly say that it is necessary to grasp magnitude, change, and time by the same thing, but rather that ‘it is necessary to grasp magnitude and change by the same thing as time’. That is, he presupposes that there is a certain capacity by which time is grasped, and then magnitude and change are said to be necessarily grasped by the same capacity.¹²

Gregoric is making the following claims. First, he argues that, for Aristotle, while magnitude and change must be graspable by the same thing that grasps time, the thing doing that grasping need not be the common-sense of *DA* III.1. The idea here seems to be that while magnitude and change are *perceptible* by the common-sense (as ‘*koinê aisthêsis*’ is employed in III.1, *not* as it is used here), they must also be *graspable* by some other perceptual faculty, and it is this faculty that Aristotle discusses here.¹³ But

¹² Gregoric [2007], 105.

¹³ Since Gregoric goes on to argue that it is primarily the union of perception and imagination that grasps time, I find it helpful to think of the issue as somewhat turning on Aristotle’s use of ‘*gnôridzein*’ rather than ‘*aisthanesthai*’ in the above passage (note, though, that Gregoric does not put it this way). In other words, the common-sense of *DA* III.1 is what *perceives* magnitude and change, but that does not preclude another faculty from *grasping* magnitude and change. What is crucial to Gregoric’s interpretation is that Aristotle does not explicitly say that time is *perceived* by the same thing as the common-objects, just that it is *grasped* or *recognized* by the same thing.

Aristotle has not chosen his words well if this is what he is intending to communicate, for he explicitly mentions *DA* at 449b30, just above the passage in question (as, indeed, he does throughout the treatises that make up *PN*). It would be misleading, then, for Aristotle to list off the two most obvious common-objects, pair those objects with the terms ‘*koinê aisthêsis*’ and ‘*prôton aisthêtikon*,’ and yet expect his reader to understand that time is not in fact perceived in the way the common-objects are.

But even if we accept this emendation and interpretation, I contend that Gregoric cannot explain why Aristotle brings up time at all, much less magnitude and change. He claims that the move from the need for a shared grasping-faculty for magnitude, change, and time to the implication of the common-sense proceeds via the introduction of images.¹⁴ Grasp of time requires images, Gregoric contends, and images require the imagination, so all three are grasped by the union of perception and imagination. But on this reading, what reason does Aristotle have for we thinking that grasp of time *requires* the use of images, as he here claims?

Gregoric cites two passages. The first is the sentence immediately preceding the quoted passage, where Aristotle says: ‘The question of why we cannot think of anything without magnitude, or of timeless things without time, requires separate consideration’ [450a7-9]. Gregoric says that we are here ‘told that imagination introduces temporal dimensions, which already suggest[s] that the grasp of time is

¹⁴ Note that Gregoric’s reading is dependent on the accuracy of the manuscript he uses. My reading is consistent with his manuscript as well as with the alternative adopted by Freudenthal [1869], and, later, Ross [1955].

closely connected with imagination.’ But at best this shows that particular acts of imagination require a grasp of time, not the inverse claim that a grasp of time is dependent on imagination. To see this, consider an analogous case. Just as we cannot think without time, he also says that we cannot think without magnitude (450a7). It clearly does not follow, though, that awareness of magnitude depends on images: indeed, Aristotle makes it clear in *DA* III.1 that it is able to be perceived. On this point Gregoric will have to agree. How, then, can the perfectly analogous case of time fare any differently?

The second passage he cites in support of the dependence of grasp of time on imagination is *DM* 2 452b23-29, where Aristotle says:

So when the movement of the object and that of time keep pace, memory occurs. It is possible to think one is remembering when one is not, but impossible to remember without knowing that one is remembering; the very remembering was the knowledge. If the movement of the object occurs without that of time, or vice versa, one does not remember.

Gregoric accurately glosses this passage as claiming that ‘we remember when the image of a thing occurs together with the image of time.’¹⁵ Here, though, Aristotle is just reiterating his view that remembering requires a grasp of time. In particular, he gives details about the kind of grasp of time necessary for remembering to occur. Thus, what this passage shows is: (1) that we can have an image of time; and (2) such an image is necessary for memory. This is a claim about what *memory* requires, not

¹⁵ Gregoric [2007], 106. Note that, as my translation makes plain, Aristotle doesn’t speak of ‘images’ but of ‘movement’ (*kinêsis*). Gregoric reads *kinêsis* as referring to images and cites a variety of other commentators who concur. I will grant him this interpretation.

what a grasp of time does. In other words, Aristotle is not making a general claim about our grasp of time as it functions in contexts that do not involve remembering.

Thus, I do not think Gregoric succeeds in showing that it is impossible to grasp time without the imagination. Moreover, his account leaves us wondering why Aristotle mentions magnitude and change at all. On anyone's reading of *DM* 1, Aristotle explicitly states that a grasp of time is necessary for memory, and that images are an affection of the common-sense. If images are necessary for grasping time, as Gregoric suggests, then Aristotle's point will be proved. Why bring in talk of magnitude and change at all?

While he does not address this—beyond the above attempt to motivate mention of time—he does pose a similar question to the standard interpretation. Readings like mine, he argues, cannot account for Aristotle's decision to include the discussion of images. For, Gregoric asks, if the standard reading is correct to take our awareness of time as a function of the common-sense simply in virtue of sharing its basis with magnitude and change, why the extra argument?¹⁶

It is quite clear, though, why Aristotle brings up images. Indeed, he explains himself in the very passage under consideration. At 449b15-17, he argues that one is not remembering something when one is currently perceiving or thinking it, and as such, he concludes at 449b24 that memory is neither perception (strictly so-called) nor judgment. This suggests that he will assimilate it to the imagination, for he tends

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 105.

to recognize only three cognitive faculties: perception, reason, and imagination.¹⁷ He follows through on this expectation in our passage at 450a12-13, where he says, ‘memory, even that of intelligible objects, is not without an image.’¹⁸ Since memories require the grasp of time together with an image of the thing being remembered, it is not enough just to show that we apprehend time by the common-sense: Aristotle must demonstrate that images are also perceptually-based. While he doesn’t provide an argument that shows that images are affections of the common-sense, he here expresses a commitment to that view.

Clearly Gregoric is right to say that both imagination and perception are at play here: in the passage at hand, Aristotle moves freely from talk of the one to talk of the other. He draws conclusions about the common-sense and the aegis of the perceptual faculty from claims about the role of imagination in memory. At no point does Aristotle suggest that he is talking about different things, and given the inadequacy of Gregoric’s interpretation, it seems Aristotle’s argument would not have been valid if it turned out that he were equivocating when he used *koinê aisthêsis* and *prôton aisthêtikon*.

But whereas Gregoric says that ‘[f]or Aristotle, such joint work goes beyond perception in the narrow sense, but it remains within the boundaries of perception in a wider sense,’¹⁹ I see this passage as definitive proof, contrary to Hamlyn’s interpretation, that Aristotle is committed to the view that the *koinê aisthêsis* of *DA*

¹⁷ Cf. *DA* III.3.

¹⁸ See also 450a22-23 (where he says that memory belongs to imagination) and 452b23-29, discussed above.

¹⁹ Gregoric [2007], 109.

III.1 has the wide range of functions that Ross envisions in his commentary.