

Phenomenology and the Metaphysics of Sight

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On Touch and Life in the *De Anima*

Christopher P. Long

Remember that you, dependent on your sight,
do not realize how many things are tangible.

HELEN KELLER, *The World I Live In*¹

Between the beautiful things with which the *De Anima* begins and the tongue with which it ends, we come into contact with an account of touch in which the very nature of perceiving is felt. “Of beautiful things” the *De Anima* begins as it embarks upon an inquiry into the soul that concludes with a gesture to the tongue and its capacity to “signify something to another.”² A certain way of knowing is the beautiful thing with which the *De Anima*, like the *Physics* and the *Metaphysics*, begins; and as with those texts, so with this, vision seems to be the focus of it. Where the *De Anima* says “τὴν εἰδῆσιν” and goes on to suggest that insight into the nature of the soul is beautiful because it is both precise and wondrous, the *Physics* and the *Metaphysics* say “τὸ εἰδέναι” and speak in turn of a path of inquiry from what is more familiar to us to what is first by nature, and of the delight we take in our capacity to see which “of all the powers of perceiving, makes us recognize things and brings to light many differences.”³ Yet between the “beautiful things” with which the *De Anima* begins and the tongue with which it ends, we encounter the *aporia* of touch that threatens to subvert the primacy of sight. The tongue appears here in the middle as well, though not as the organ of speech, but as the very flesh by which we enter into

1 Helen Keller, *The World I Live in* (New York, 1908), p. 7.

2 Aristotle, *De Anima*, 402a1, 435b24–25. All translations from the Greek are my own. The question of the unity of the *De Anima* is not insignificant here, but not much depends on whether the book was fully complete for publication in Aristotle’s time. Rather, what is of interest is the text that has been inherited and the form in which it has been handed down. Martha Nussbaum challenges the best argument for the disunity of the *De Anima*, though she insists that the third book is “internally a mess.” See Martha C. Nussbaum and Amélie O. Rorty, eds., *Essays on Aristotle’s De Anima* (Oxford, 1995), p. 6. Ross recognizes that “[t]he plan of the *De Anima* is to a large extent a clear and well thought-out one.” He goes on to point out that the manuscript of Book III is “less carefully prepared for publication than that of the earlier books.” See Aristotle, *De Anima*, ed. W.D. Ross (Oxford, 1961), pp. 12 and 14.

3 See Aristotle, *Physics*, 184a10–18. See too Aristotle, *Metaphysics*, 980a21–7.

intimate connection with the world. If at the beginning and in the end, the *De Anima* articulates a path of inquiry that takes its bearings from the beautiful things said concerning the soul and finds its voice in the eloquence of the human tongue, in the middle, we are made to feel the poignant *aporia* of touch and to experience the possibility that our inquiry might ultimately lose its way.

This inquiry into the nature of the soul, which itself is said to “contribute greatly toward all truth, and especially toward the truth concerning nature,” proceeds along a familiar peripatetic path. Aristotle points to it in the *De Anima* when he writes:

While inquiring concerning the soul it is at the same time [ἄμα] necessary, while going through the impasses through which we must pass if we are going to move forward, to take along with us [συμπαραλαμβάνειν] the opinions of all our predecessors who declared something concerning the soul, so that we might take hold of the things that have been said beautifully while, if something was not said beautifully, we might beware of these.⁴

Already here, as at the end, the tongue, with its capacity to signify something to another, is felt to bear upon the well-being of the inquiry itself. This peripatetic path unfolds as legomenology in its most familiar guise: the attempt to articulate the truth by attending carefully to the things said well by those who came before.⁵ Book I of the *De Anima* is thus no prologue *preceding* but fundamentally divorced from the inquiry itself; rather, it is a prolegomenon in the more literal sense in which the inquiry itself *proceeds as* a collaborative endeavor between those who came before and we who continue to seek the truth concerning the nature of the soul. Thus, Aristotle’s own peripatetic legomenology opens a determinate path for us into the received text; for if his inquiry proceeds in collaboration with his predecessors, ours ought also to proceed by attending carefully to the things Aristotle himself said beautifully even if we too must beware when something is not so said. The adverb, “καλῶς,” here as throughout the *De Anima*, modifies a particular way of speaking, which is said to be beautiful precisely because it articulates something of the truth. The adverb itself appears most often in the *De Anima* in contexts in which Aristotle

4 Aristotle, *De Anima*, 403b20–24.

5 For a more detailed discussion of legomenology as a peripatetic methodology, see Christopher P. Long, *Aristotle on the Nature of Truth* (New York, 2011), pp. 6–11.

is concerned to determine the truth of the things his predecessors said.⁶ The intimate connection between the nature of truth toward which the inquiry into the soul contributes and the beauty of speech is amplified when Aristotle, rehearsing the opinions of those who came before at the end of the first book, suggests that “from the things having been said, it is clear that . . . the soul is not beautifully [καλῶς] or truly [ἀληθῶς] said to move itself.”⁷ Articulating the identity of the beautiful and the true here, Aristotle gives voice to the manner in which truth appears as something beautifully signified by the tongue. The beauty of truth and the truth of beauty animate the inquiry that is the *De Anima*.

But if the truth of this text may be felt by attending to what it articulates beautifully, then to find a way forward through the *aporia* of touch that appears in the middle of the text, we will need to pursue a peripatetic legomenology of our own in relation to the things we have inherited from Aristotle. Such a path will require a certain way of attending to the text, one caught up as much in a tangible as in an auditory metaphor of inquiry; for legomenological attention is rooted in the etymology of the Latin *ad-tendēre*, to stretch toward, and points in this way as much to a gesture of touch as to a way of listening. We have already heard the manner in which the opening lines of the *Metaphysics* spoke of knowing in visual terms, but its first sentence also articulates beautifully the way the intentionality even of the visual practice of “τὸ εἰδέναι” is rooted in a gesture of touch. That most famous text speaks of a kind of stretching out that, when expressed as it is there in the middle voice, becomes the very articulation of desire: “All human beings by nature stretch themselves out [ὀρέγονται]

6 See, for example, Aristotle *De Anima*, 407a3, where the *Timaeus* is criticized for calling the soul a magnitude; 414a19, where those who think the soul is neither without body nor is a body speak beautifully; 415b28 and 416a2, where Empedocles is criticized for failing to speak beautifully of the “up” and the “down”; 417b8; 419a15, where Democritus is criticized for saying that what is between the eye and the thing seen is empty; 426a20, where earlier φυσιολόγοι are criticized for supposing that there is no color without seeing, or flavor without tasting. The use of καλῶς in close connection with verbs of saying in these contexts is often covered over by translations that emphasize correctness. Barnes regularly translates such formulations as “misrepresents” (419a15) and “mistaken” (426a20); while even Sachs falls into it at 407a3, 417b10 and 419a15, translating καλῶς, as “right” in the first two instances and “rightly” in the last. See Jonathan Barnes, *The Complete Works of Aristotle* (Princeton, NJ, 1984), vol. 1. Joe Sachs, *Aristotle’s On the Soul and On Memory and Recollection* (Santa Fe, 2001). Such translations are not strictly wrong; they simply fail to articulate beautifully the manner in which Aristotle writes of beauty in relation to articulation.

7 Aristotle, *De Anima*, 411a24–26.

toward knowing.”⁸ The middle voice of the Greek ὀρέγεσθαι, “to stretch out toward something,” comes to mean “to desire,” and thus already beautifully, if implicitly, articulates the intimate connection between touch and desire that will, in the *De Anima*, be said to differentiate the perceptive powers of animal life from all other living things.⁹

The intentionality of the peripatetic legomenology we must then here pursue is more tangible and auditory than it is visual; for it involves stretching ourselves out toward the phenomenon of touch as it is said in the text so that we might come to feel the contours of the *aporia* of touch in the middle. There Aristotle finds his way forward blocked by the phenomenon of touch which seems itself out of touch with those powers of perceiving that operate at a distance and through a proper medium. Attending thus to the ways touch is said in the *De Anima* leads first to the boundary between the nutritive and perceptive soul which, marked as it is by the presence of touch, suggests the intimacy of our connection with the nutritive dimensions of life and the very elements of things. As the primal power of perceiving, touch continues to make its presence felt as Aristotle speaks in turn of the distal powers of perceiving, first of seeing, then of hearing and smelling, before turning, in the middle, to those powers of perceiving that operate by touch. With taste and touch we come into contact with an *aporia* that threatens the unity of Aristotle’s account of perceiving itself. By attending carefully to these texts, and specifically, to the things Aristotle says concerning the nature of touch, its organ, the flesh, and the ambiguity of its medium, we are returned to the things Aristotle says about the nature of perceiving itself and made to feel the intimate connection we have with the world in and with which we live. And so in the end, by attending to the ways Aristotle speaks beautifully about touch, we arrive at an account of life and death itself in terms of the presence of our capacity to touch; for if by touch we first feel our way into life, it is by touch that life slips ultimately away from us. By following the itinerary of touch, we come into more intimate contact with the contours of animal life itself.

1 Living Said in Many Ways

In a text aptly titled *On Touching—Jean-Luc Nancy*, Jacques Derrida gives voice to the peculiar manner in which touch is at once set apart from the other

⁸ Aristotle, *Metaphysics*, 980a21.

⁹ Aristotle, *De Anima*, 413b1–414a3.

powers of perceiving in the *De Anima* and yet also remains intimately connected with the most primordial elements of life:

While *Peri psychēs* is thus a treatise on the pure life of the living, it recurrently accords to touch a status that sets it apart. Touch may well exist apart from the other senses, but Aristotle stresses that without it, no other sense would exist. As has been noted, all animals possess this sense, which is also the sense of nutrition.¹⁰

Aristotle's attempt to articulate the nature of the soul, itself "a sort of principle of living beings," at once throws the phenomenon of touch into sharp relief and sets it into intimate connection with the nutritive capacity of the soul that characterizes the most basic forms of life.¹¹ Touch appears thematically for the first time in the *De Anima* in II.2, as Aristotle seeks to articulate the nature of life itself by distinguishing ensouled from soulless beings.¹² Thus he begins: πλεοναχῶς δὲ τοῦ ζῆν λεγομένου—

Living is said in many ways, and if any one of the following is present in something, we say that it lives, for example thought, the power to perceive, motion and stand still with respect to place, in addition motion according to nourishment, and wasting away as well as growth.¹³

10 Jacques Derrida, *On Touching—Jean-Luc Nancy* (Stanford, 2005), p. 24.

11 Aristotle, *De Anima*, 402a6–7. Aristotle writes of the soul: ἔστι γὰρ οἶον ἀρχὴ τῶν ζώων. Commenting on this phrase, Polansky writes "[i]n saying that soul is principle τῶν ζώων, Aristotle's usual term for animals (see 403b18 and subsequently) where we might expect him to say living things, Aristotle leaves us in some perplexity regarding his meaning." He goes on to suggest: "Thus the use of the term ζῶον [sic] may highlight the imprecision of the understanding of soul preceding Aristotle. Whether animals or living beings generally are at issue, soul as a principle will be the nature of the ensouled being and have special dignity." See Ronald Polansky, *Aristotle's De Anima* (New York, 2007), p. 37. Above the term is translated "living being" to hold something of the ambiguity between living things and animals, the distinction between which is based upon the capacity to touch.

12 There is a brief mention of touching already in Aristotle, *De Anima*, 403a10–16, where Aristotle rehearses the *aporiai* associated with the embodiment of the soul and suggests that although a straight line touches a sphere at a point, no separated straight line will touch a bronze sphere in this way. Ross suggests that passage means to emphasize that a perceptible line "would touch the sphere not at a point but over a small area." See Aristotle, *De Anima*, ed. Ross, p. 168.

13 Aristotle, *De Anima*, 413a22–25.

In delineating the nature of life, Aristotle attends to the ways living is said. The principle of the inquiry, the point from which it begins, is legomenological: the many ways living is said puts us in touch with the contours of life itself.

The way living is said here articulates a definitive movement toward the roots of life. Beginning with the life of the mind, Aristotle touches upon perceiving and locomotion in order ultimately to arrive at a discussion of nourishment, where the boundary between ensouled and soulless beings is encountered. Plants and other vegetative life grow and die here where they are said to live precisely because they have the fundamental capacity for nourishment, τροφή. Thus the passage locates the very roots of life in the capacity to take in food.¹⁴ Having thus marked the boundary between living and non-living things, Aristotle articulates a difference between those beings that simply live, and animals, which “live first [πρώτως] through the power to perceive [αἴσθησις].”¹⁵ This distinction between living things and animals, however, is marked not by a general ability to perceive, but by the specific capacity to touch. Again, Aristotle relies upon the ways we speak about the things we encounter:

For even the things that don't move or alter their place, if they have the power to perceive, we say they are animals [ζῶα] and not only that they live [ζῆν]. But of the powers of perceiving, touch first [πρώτον] inheres in them all, and just as the capacity for nourishment is able to be separated from touch and the other powers of perceiving, so too is touch [able to be separated] from the other powers of perceiving.¹⁶

The passage first draws the distinction between animal life and other living things by attending to the ways living is said; and it then goes on to articulate the nature of touch in striking parallel to the capacity for nourishment. As nourishment marks the boundary between living and non-living beings, touch marks the boundary between animals and all other living beings. Aristotle's repeated iterations of “πρώτως” in this context suggest that the primacy of touch is primal because, as Jean-Louis Chrétien suggests, “it is through and through primal for life.”¹⁷ But touch here is also heard to be primal because it

14 Aristotle, *De Anima*, 413a31–2. Aristotle here says that this capacity to take in food can be separated from the other capacities of life, although they cannot be separated in mortals from the capacity for nourishment.

15 Aristotle, *De Anima*, 413b2.

16 Aristotle, *De Anima*, 413b2–7.

17 The entire quotation from Jean-Louis Chrétien is: “Touch is not primitive because supposedly coarse and required as a basis for the higher senses, but because it is through and

is the power of perceiving most intimately connected to the capacity for nourishment. This intimacy sets it apart from the more distal powers of perceiving endemic to animal life—the powers of seeing, hearing and smelling, though it brings it yet closer to the power of tasting, which itself is said to be “a certain sort of touch.”¹⁸ Here again the importance of the tongue makes itself felt.

The intimate connection between touch and nutritive life finds further articulation in II.3, where Aristotle emphasizes the manner in which touch is bound intimately up with appetite, the most rudimentary expression of desire. Where II.2 spoke of locomotion, growth and decay, II.3, begins with nutrition, perceiving and the capacity to desire.¹⁹ Touch, it seems, awakens animal life to desire. Aristotle puts it this way:

If there is the power to perceive, so too is there the power to desire; for desire [ὄρεξις] is longing [ἐπιθυμία] and spiritedness [θυμός] and wish [βούλησις], while all animals have at least one of the powers of perceiving, that of touch, and in that in which the power of perceiving inheres, there are also pleasure and pain and the sense of the pleasant and the

through primal for life.” See Jean-Louis Chrétien, *The Call and the Response* (New York, 2004), p. 98. Perhaps the formulation could be slightly qualified to suggest that touch is primal for *animal* life, as nourishment is for vegetative life. In a beautiful essay on the science of touch, Frederick Sachs articulates the primal nature of touch this way: “Touch, in short, is the core of sentience, the foundation for communication with the world around us, and probably the single sense that is as old as life itself.” See Frederick Sachs, “The Intimate Sense: Understanding the Mechanics of Touch,” *Sciences* 28/1 (1988), 28–34, here: p. 28.

18 Aristotle, *De Anima*, 422a8. In his discussion of intemperance in the *Nicomachean Ethics*, Aristotle calls the pleasures associated with touch “slavish” and “bestial” because it “is present in us not insofar as we are human, but insofar as we are animals.” See Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, 118a23–b3. See Pavlos Kontos, “Akolasia as Radical Ethical Vice: The Evidence of NE 1140b11–21,” *Ancient Philosophy* 29/2 (2009), 337–347, here: p. 339.

19 Aristotle, *De Anima*, 414a31–2. The manner in which the discussion of desire unfolds is significant. Delineating the powers of the soul, Aristotle says: “The powers we are saying are the capacity for nutrition, perceiving, desiring, motion with respect to place and thinking things through.” The passage mirrors that in 413a23–5, although there he moved from thinking to the various kinds of κίνησις, emphasizing particularly those motions—locomotion, growth and decay—associated with life processes. Here Aristotle includes the capacity to desire and, instead of speaking simply of νοῦς, he emphasizes a specific kind of thinking, διανοητικόν. The shift in direction and the introduction of desire and the capacity to think things through introduce the shift in focus from life to animal life.

painful; and where these are, there also is longing [ἐπιθυμία], which is the desire [ὄρεξις] for the pleasant.²⁰

Desire, itself a certain way of reaching out to the world, is animated by our capacity to touch. The world first appears as pleasant or painful by way of touch. Thus, it is also in this context that the phenomenon of being appeared to, or φαντασία, becomes an issue of explicit concern.²¹ Already in II.2, Aristotle had said that with the power of perceiving comes φαντασία and ὄρεξις.²² However, here in II.3, Aristotle's thinking concerning the connection between φαντασία and perceiving appears itself to be in transition; for here although he says that "living beings having touch also have desire," he goes on to say "it is unclear whether they must also have φαντασία" and by the time II.3 is brought to a conclusion, Aristotle simply asserts that some animals "do not even have φαντασία."²³ In the end, of course, Aristotle navigates a safe passage concerning the relationship between animal life, perception and φαντασία, when, in III.10–11, he articulates the difference between perceptive and deliberative φαντασία, seeming thus to reaffirm his original intuition that all animal life is informed by a certain φαντασία.²⁴ This original intuition comes to language already *De Anima* II.2–3, where our capacity to be appeared to is said to be animated by our capacity for touch.

The world presents itself to us as something of value for us by way of touch. The connection is visceral and elemental, for it involves our deepest desire to sustain ourselves in existence, to seek from the world what might permit us to remain in and of the world. Our intimate relationship with the world unfolds at this most primal and even pre-elemental level. If, for Aristotle, the elements are four—fire, air, water and earth—these elements themselves are said to be composed of opposing principles: fire, of the dry and hot; air, of the hot and moist; water, of the moist and cold; earth of the cold and dry.²⁵

20 Aristotle, *De Anima*, 414b1–6.

21 For a discussion of how best to translate φαντασία in Aristotle, see Long, *Aristotle on the Nature of Truth*, pp. 82, 131–137. The locution of "being appeared to" is inspired by K. Lycos, "Aristotle and Plato on 'Appearing,'" *Mind* 73 (1964), 496–514.

22 Aristotle, *De Anima*, 413b22–3.

23 See Aristotle, *De Anima*, 414b15–6; 415a11, respectively.

24 Aristotle, *De Anima*, 433b29–434a10. For a good discussion of the difference between perceptive and deliberative φαντασία, see C. D. C. Reeve, *Action, Contemplation, and Happiness* (Cambridge Mass., 2012), pp. 181–186. See too Long, *Aristotle on the Nature of Truth*, pp. 86–92.

25 See Montgomery Furth, *Substance, Form and Psyche: An Aristotelian Metaphysics* (Cambridge, 1988), p. 77. See too *De Generatione et Corruptione*, 330b22. The order in

The world itself unfolds as these pre-elemental principles play in relation to one another; fire becoming air as it moistens, air becoming water as it cools, and water becoming earth as it dries. We are nourished by the playful unfolding of the world, participating with it at this pre-elemental level by way of touch.²⁶ Thus, Aristotle says “touch is the power to perceive food, for all animals are nourished by what is dry or moist and hot or cold, of which the power to perceive is touch, whereas of the other things it is incidentally.”²⁷ This passage reinforces the intimate connection between animal life and the pre-elemental unfolding of the world, anticipating already what will be emphasized at the end of the *De Anima*, namely, that “it is necessary for the body of the animal to be capable of touch, if the animal is going to preserve itself.”²⁸

Here also, however, something of the *aporia* of touch that will be poignantly felt in the middle of the *De Anima* is suggested, for the proper objects of touch seem to put it in touch with an overabundance of contraries. This, its excessive nature, sets touch apart from the other proper powers of perceiving, as Aristotle says explicitly when he turns his full attention to touch in *De Anima* II.11:

For every power of perceiving seems to have one pair of contraries; for example, sight is of white and black, hearing is of high and deep pitch and taste of bitter and sweet, but there are many pairs of contraries in what is tangible: hot/cold, dry/moist, hard/soft, and how ever many others there are of this sort.²⁹

In reaching out to the world, touch, the power of desire itself, exposes us to an excessive plurality of contraries that give us an intimate feel for things even as

which these contraries are articulated is designed to illustrate the manner in which the elements are able to change into one another by virtue of a change in one of their contraries so long as the other contrary remains stable as the underlying middle term of the transition. So, for example, earth can become fire when it is heated because they share the dimension of dryness.

26 Karen Barad takes this idea a step yet further when she speaks of touching as what matter itself does: “In an important sense, in a breathtakingly intimate sense, touching, sensing, is what matter does, or rather, what matter is: matter is condensations of response-ability. Touching is a matter of response.” See Karen Barad, “On Touching—The Inhuman That Therefore I Am,” *Differences: A Journal of Feminist Cultural Studies* 23/3 (2012), 206–223, here: p. 215. For a discussion of truth as response-ability in Aristotle, see Long, *Aristotle on the Nature of Truth*, pp. 14–15.

27 Aristotle, *De Anima*, 414b7–10.

28 Aristotle, *De Anima*, 434b12–13.

29 Aristotle, *De Anima*, 422b23–27.

they refuse to consolidate into a proper object. Touch, it seems, never easily offers us something to grasp; its surplus, rooted in a desire to stretch out toward the world, ensures at once that the world in relinquishing itself to us remains also always elusive.³⁰

Thus, by touch we come to experience the recalcitrance of things that belies the delusion that the world is simply at our disposal. Touch exposes us to a surplus we cannot grasp. It opens us to the supposition that our intimate connection with the world puts *us* at *its* disposal. If by touch the world presents itself as something of value for us, by touch too we come to experience ourselves as something of value for the world. The reciprocal nature of touch awakens us to our deepest ecological responsibilities. This will be felt more acutely as we traverse further along the itinerary of touch Aristotle charts in the *De Anima*, for the peculiar reciprocity of touch, what Merleau-Ponty has called its “reversibility,” puts us in touch with a dimension of perceiving that is eclipsed by the distal powers of perception.³¹ Before turning, however, to the heuristics of touch itself, it is necessary to turn first, as Aristotle does, to those distal powers of perceiving that lend determination to the nature and function of perceiving itself.

2 Touch and Other Proper Powers of Perceiving

Once Aristotle has located the difference between animals and other living things in the capacity to perceive, and more specifically, in the capacity to touch, he outlines the basic contours of the power of perceiving itself. He begins, strangely enough, by making a kind of retreat; for although the inquiry to this point has focused on the *powers* of the soul, Aristotle insists that it is necessary to say what the activities and the actions themselves are first, and prior to this even, to examine their objects.³² Here, however, the power of touch recedes below the surface, for as mentioned, the nature of its activity and

30 Throughout his article on touch and thought in Aristotle, Stanley Rosen slips too easily between touch and grasp as he appeals to the touch of the hand to understand the power of touch in Aristotle. See Stanley Rosen, “Thought and Touch, a Note on Aristotle’s *De Anima*,” *Phronesis* 6 (1961), 127–137. A good account of the elusive nature of touch itself, which is “distinctive in its degree of heterogeneity,” can be found in Matthew Ratcliffe, “What Is Touch?,” *Australasian Journal of Philosophy* 90/3 (2011), 413–432, here: pp. 16–17.

31 Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *The Visible and the Invisible*, ed. Claude Lefort (Evanston, 1968), p. 141. For a good discussion of Aristotle’s understanding of touch in relation to the idea of chiasmic intertwining in Merleau-Ponty, see Rebecca Steiner Goldner, “Touch and Flesh in Aristotle’s *De Anima*,” *Epoché* 15/2 (2011), 439–440.

32 Aristotle, *De Anima*, 415a16–22.

the objects with which it operates are less obvious than are those of the other powers of the soul. Even so, however, in the chapters leading to his explicit accounts of taste and touch, the power of touch refuses to remain submerged, for it appears again first when Aristotle speaks of the impossibility for powers of perceiving to be deceived by their proper objects and then again in the discussion of hearing, when metaphors of touch lend texture to the nature of hearing itself.³³ Further, when Aristotle speaks of the inferior nature of smell in humans as opposed to other animals, touch comes again to the surface as the power of perceiving in which human beings excel. Even in the chapter on seeing, the power of touch makes itself felt.

The connection between seeing and touch comes most poignantly to language when Aristotle seeks to uncover the medium through which the power of seeing necessarily operates. Although he speaks neither of touch nor of contact here, Aristotle insists that “if one puts something having color up against the eye itself, it will not be seen.”³⁴ This is offered, indeed, as a “clear sign [σημείον . . . φανερόν]” that color, the proper object of the power to see, is in fact only seen through a transparent medium. Aristotle thus criticizes Democritus, who he says “does not speak beautifully [οὐ γὰρ καλῶς . . . λέγει]” when he supposes that what is between, τὸ μεταξύ, is empty.³⁵ The very capacity to see can be destroyed by touch; and yet, the medium through which vision encounters the visible is itself a matter of touch. Seeing is a kind of touching and being touched.

Thus Aristotle speaks of vision in terms first of continuous motion, then of a certain passion. He begins by saying, “color moves that which is transparent [τὸ διαφανές], such as air, and by this, if it is continuous [συνεχοῦς ὄντος], the sense organ is moved.”³⁶ Continuity, in the *Metaphysics*, is said to occur “whenever the limit of two things that are touching and held together become one and the same.”³⁷ The medium seems, thus, to be of decisive importance for Aristotle’s account of the distal powers of perceiving precisely because it puts the perceived object in touch with the perceiving organ in a way that does

33 Aristotle, *De Anima*, 418a13–4 and 420b1–4.

34 Aristotle, *De Anima*, 419a12–13.

35 Aristotle, *De Anima*, 419a15–16.

36 Aristotle, *De Anima*, 419a13–15.

37 Aristotle, *Metaphysics*, 1068b26–1069a18. For a discussion of this passage, see Christopher P. Long, “The Ontological Reappropriation of Phronesis,” *Continental Philosophy Review* 35/1 (2002), 35–60, here: p. 59 (n36). The language used there of a kind of touching that “reduces difference to the same” lacked a certain nuance that might here be gained by a more sophisticated account of touch and the nature of the medium.

not destroy the organ itself. The medium ensures a gentle touch. The touching endemic to seeing is further articulated as a kind of being-acted upon. Already in *De Anima* 11.5, where he seeks to articulate “what is common to all perceiving,” Aristotle had offered an important and nuanced account of perceiving as a certain way of being acted upon that does not involve alteration, or as Aristotle’s Greek expresses more adequately, “ἀλλοίωσις,” “becoming-other.”³⁸ Being acted upon in its most familiar sense involves becoming-other insofar as it makes what is acted upon different from what it was prior to being affected. Aristotle goes to some lengths to delineate a different sort of affection to describe the passion of perceiving, for when a perceiving organ is acted upon by its object, it does not become other, but rather, it settles into what it most characteristically is.³⁹ The encounter between the visible object and the organ of vision is said to involve a kind of “συνεχής,” a way of “holding together,” because the activity of perceiving is itself an active condition of the soul, a ἕξις, that involves a power of the soul “holding together” with its object. Aristotle calls this activity of “holding together,” “τὸ αἰσθάνεσθαι,” to be perceived to. The awkward English here is designed to suggest the manner in which the articular infinitive in Greek expresses itself in the middle voice. The activity of perceiving is middle voiced in a definitive way, for it involves the activity and receptivity of the power of perceiving *and* the perceived object *both*.⁴⁰ Perceiving points to a dynamic and reciprocal way of being together with the perceived world.

For the power of seeing, what Aristotle calls the medium, τὸ μεταξύ, accomplishes the middle voiced activity that is perceiving itself by enabling the proper object of vision to touch the organ of vision without destroying it. Aristotle thus responds to Democritus’s insistence that there is a void between vision and the visible this way:

For seeing comes into being when what is capable of perceiving is acted upon by something, and because it is not possible for it to be acted upon

38 See Aristotle, *De Anima*, 416b32–3 and 417b5–7, respectively. For a discussion of this, see Long, *Aristotle on the Nature of Truth*, pp. 121–127.

39 For a discussion of ἕξις as a kind of settling into itself, χαθίστασθαι, see Long, *Aristotle on the Nature of Truth*, pp. 123–127. See too Aristotle, *Physics*, 247b17–18.

40 The legomenology of τὸ αἰσθάνεσθαι found in *De Anima* 11.5 is rooted in the articulation of perceiving in the middle voice. See Long, *Aristotle on the Nature of Truth*, p. 122. Welsch does a nice job of emphasizing the importance of the expression “τὸ αἰσθάνεσθαι,” see Wolfgang Welsch, *Aisthesis: Grundzüge und Perspektiven der Aristotelischen Sinneslehre* (Stuttgart, 1987), pp. 103–104.

by the color itself that is seen, what remains is that it is acted upon by the medium [τὸ μεταξύ], so that it is necessary that there be something between [ὥστ' ἀναγκασιὸν τι εἶναι μεταξύ]. And if what is in between were to become empty, it is not that nothing would be seen with precision, but nothing would be seen at all.⁴¹

The very possibility of seeing depends upon the medium through which the organ of seeing can be acted upon, indeed, touched, in a way that enables the “holding together” that is perceiving. The things Democritus had said are not beautiful because they fail to account for the possibility of perceiving. Aristotle thus articulates his own position both in response to the things previously said and in an effort to more beautifully account for the phenomenon of perceiving itself. His account is designed to apply to all powers of perceiving in common, yet the need for a medium, so decisive for the distal powers, is less clear with regard to taste and touch. Here again the *aporia* of touch makes itself felt; for Aristotle insists that “the same account [ὁ δ' αὐτὸς λόγος] exists for sound and smell, for no sound or smell produces perception when touching the sense organ, but by the motion of sound and smell, the medium is set in motion, and by this the sense organs of each are moved.”⁴² Turning then, however, to touch and taste, Aristotle modifies his language slightly, speaking no longer of the “same” account, but saying rather, “[c]oncerning touch and taste it holds similarly [ὁμοίως], but this is not apparent; the reason for this will be clear later.”⁴³ The *aporia* of touch comes to language in the shift from “the same” to “the similar.” Aristotle sees it. He recognizes too that it will concern the nature and meaning of “τὸ μεταξύ,” the medium. But here he simply touches upon it only to set it quickly aside so that his attempt to articulate a common account of the powers of perceiving oriented primarily by the experience of sight is not derailed.

Yet in delineating the manner in which touch is already at work in the account of seeing, we are able to see, or perhaps better, to hear, the manner in which touch itself is integrated into the common account of perceiving. Although, as Golluber has suggested (see footnote 65), the *De Anima* is the “battleground” for the supremacy disputed by sight and touch, this apparent battle itself appears only on the surface of Aristotle's account, for the deeper truth is that seeing is sublime because it always involves a kind of touching. There is no battle here, only the intimate cooperation of the powers of the soul

41 Aristotle, *De Anima*, 419a17–21.

42 Aristotle, *De Anima*, 419a25–28.

43 Aristotle, *De Anima*, 419a30–31.

and the objects that appear to them. The manner in which touch makes itself felt in the things Aristotle says about the other proper powers of perceiving suggests this intimate connection.

If touch has already been *seen* to be integrated into Aristotle's account of seeing, metaphors of touch are *heard* as Aristotle seeks to articulate the nature of hearing itself. Here again, Aristotle speaks of a certain "holding together," a "συνέχεια," by way of which hearing is accomplished, for "what is capable of sounding is that which is able to move air that is one in continuity [συνεχέειν] until it reaches that which hears."⁴⁴ Yet with hearing, Aristotle amplifies the connection with touch yet further, suggesting explicitly that we may understand the way differences in sound operate on the ear by appealing to metaphors of touch:

These [differences] are spoken of according to metaphors from tangible things [λέγεται κατὰ μεταφορὰν ἀπὸ τῶν ἀπτῶν], for the sharp tone moves the perceiving organ much in little time, while the flat tone moves it a little in much time [...] this seems to have an analogy to the sharp and the blunt that concern touch, for the sharp is the sort of thing that stabs, but the blunt is the sort that presses.⁴⁵

Attending to the metaphors of tangible things allows Aristotle to sharpen his account of how sharp and flat tones are heard. The metaphors carry the things said of touch over to hearing, further accentuating the manner in which the power of hearing involves certain motions of the medium of air as it touches the ear, settling it into its own activity: the hearing of "sharp" and "flat" tones. The words themselves hint at this connection; and Aristotle draws upon them as he himself seeks to bring the nature of hearing to language.⁴⁶

Touch manifests itself in Aristotle's account of smell as well, for there it is said to be analogous to taste, which itself is called "a certain type of touch."⁴⁷ But the analogy with taste is mentioned as a way of connecting smell, which

44 Aristotle, *De Anima*, 420a3–4.

45 Aristotle, *De Anima*, 420a29–b2.

46 The tongue too plays an important role in this chapter on hearing, for Aristotle here addresses the nature of voice, which is said to involve making a noise with the tongue, though one that is said to "have soul in it and some sort of φωντασία" (Aristotle, *De Anima*, 420b26–421a1).

47 Aristotle, *De Anima*, 421a19.

Aristotle considers to be the most imprecise power of *human* perceiving, with touch, which he considers our most precise perceptive capacity. Thus, he says:

For with respect to the other powers of perceiving, the human-being is left behind by many of the animals, but with respect to touch, the human is precise in a way that greatly surpasses other animals, and this is why the human is the most practically wise [φρονιμώτατον] of the animals.⁴⁸

The suggestion that human-beings are most practically wise because of our excellent capacity to touch opens the possibility that a more nuanced account of touch itself might teach us something about the nature of our ethical and political practices.⁴⁹ Yet it also suggests that Aristotle's account of φρόνησις might teach us something about the nature of touch. This avenue of investigation becomes yet more promising when it is recalled that the power of perceiving itself is understood to be a kind of ἔξις, or active condition of the

48 Aristotle, *De Anima*, 421a20–23.

49 It is remarkable that Aristotle would associate touch, the most animalistic of our powers of perceiving, with a superlative capacity for φρόνησις, an intellectual virtue that seems quintessentially human. As Jaeger has suggested in some detail, the term “φρόνησις” had with Socrates been associated with ethical reasoning, while in Plato it took on a more theoretical meaning. See Werner W. Jaeger, *Aristotle: Fundamentals of the History of His Development* (Oxford, 1948), pp. 81–84. Without endorsing his developmental theory, we can agree that in Aristotle, the valence of the term vacillates, pointing sometimes to a general capacity for intellection and sometimes to the more technical, ethico-political meaning developed in the *Nicomachean Ethics*. Whatever its specific valence here, the formulation “φρονιμώτατον ἐστὶ τῶν ζώων,” suggests that non-human animals share in a certain kind of φρόνησις. This idea is not unprecedented in Aristotle; for in the *Nicomachean Ethics*, where the term clearly has an ethico-political meaning, Aristotle notes that people “also say that some animals are practically wise [φρόνιμα], however many appear to be able to have foresight about their own lives” (Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, 1141a26–8). Lennox suggests that the difference between human character and the character of other animals lies in the fact that the “other animals do not need to integrate practical intelligence with natural virtues to achieve excellence of character.” See James G. Lennox, “Aristotle on the Biological Roots of Virtue,” in *Biology and the Foundation of Ethics*, eds. Jane Maienschein and Michael Ruse (Cambridge/New York, 1999), pp. 10–31, here: p. 13. Nothing in the argument developed here depends on ascribing a certain kind of φρόνησις to non-human animals. Rather, what is important from a legomenological perspective is the way the appearance of this word φρονιμώτατον in this context invites us to consider what Aristotle's account of φρόνησις might teach us about touch and vice versa.

soul analogous to φρόνησις and the other intellectual and ethical excellences.⁵⁰ Further, in the *Nicomachean Ethics*, ethical virtue is said to be “an active condition for the ability to choose, being in a mean condition [μεσότητι] in relation to us, determined by a ratio [λόγος] and by the means by which a practically wise person would determine it.”⁵¹ Virtue here involves a certain feel for the right thing as discerned by the person with φρόνησις. As a “mean condition relative to us,” ethical excellence is conditioned at once by the situation encountered and by the nature of the one encountering it. Practical wisdom is a cultivated ability to discern what is good and bad in a given context, and the person with practical wisdom must be well disposed toward the mean between vices on the extremes. Thus, in a sense, the person with practical wisdom is like someone with a healthy, well functioning capacity to taste. As Charles de Konnack has suggested, taste “is the sense of wisdom, the sense of ‘sapientia’ [from ‘sapere,’ to savour].”⁵² Thus, when Aristotle turns his attention to taste, as he does immediately after his discussion of smell where the question of practical wisdom first emerges, he intimates that the tongue must be in a kind of mean condition between the dry and the moist if it is to be capable of tasting. Although he does not yet use the vocabulary of the mean, τὸ μέσον, he points out that with taste, “there is nothing that is the medium [τὸ μεταξύ],” and suggests that “. . . the tongue does not perceive when it is dried out or too moist.”⁵³ The implication that the tongue itself must be in a kind of mean condition to perceive well seems confirmed when Aristotle appeals to the example of a sick person whose ability to taste is compromised: “all things appear bitter to sick people because they perceive them with a tongue full of that sort of moisture.”⁵⁴ To be capable of discerning well the taste of things, the tongue must be in a healthy mean condition, just as the person with practical wisdom, in order to choose well, must have cultivated a sense for virtue; for as Aristotle puts it in the *Nicomachean Ethics*, ethical virtue is “a certain kind of mean condition [μεσότης], since it is, at any rate, something that makes one apt to hit the mean [τοῦ μέσου].”⁵⁵ Here, however, a decisive but subtle shift

50 For an account of why the intellectual and ethical habits in Aristotle must be understood in relation to one another, see James G. Lennox, “Aristotle on the Biological Roots of Virtue,” p. 13.

51 Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, 1106b36–1107a2.

52 Charles de Konnack, “Sedeo Ergo Sum’ Considerations on the Touchstone of Certitude,” *Laval Theologique et Philosophique* VI/2 (1950), 343–348, here: p. 348.

53 Aristotle, *De Anima*, 422a15–16 and 422b5–6.

54 Aristotle, *De Anima*, 422b8–10.

55 Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, 1106b27–28. Aristotle emphasizes that virtue, ἀρετή, has a double function, for it not only brings the person with it into a good condition, but also

is already intimated, one that will find more explicit articulation as Aristotle turns his attention to the power of touch and its enigmatic medium, τὸ μεταξὺ, which has to this point failed adequately to appear.

3 The Power of Touch

Here in the middle, the inquiry into the nature of the soul confronts the *aporia* of touch that threatens to disperse the experience of perceiving, rendering it different for each power. Though it has taken him time to come to it, when Aristotle turns his full attention to touch, he does not turn away from its aporetic nature. Here the question of the medium gains in urgency as Aristotle rehearses what Derrida has called “the manifold *aporia* of touch.”⁵⁶ “There is an impasse [ἀπορίαν],” Aristotle says, “as to whether [touch is] many or one, and what indeed is the perceptual organ of the ability to touch, whether it is flesh [σάρξ] or something analogous to this in other animals, or not, but the flesh is the medium [τὸ μεταξὺ], while the first perceptual organ is something other inside.”⁵⁷ Already here, the proper boundary between the touching animal and the touchable world begins to feel porous; and this permeability also seems to introduce a deeper cleavage between the distal and the contact powers of perceiving; for not only is the medium aporetic, but touch seems to have neither a proper organ nor a proper object.

To illustrate the difficulty in identifying a proper organ of touch, Aristotle shrouds the flesh itself in an imaginary membrane so as to suggest that even so shrouded the animate body would immediately feel itself being touched.⁵⁸ The organ of touch thus seems to recede into the body itself, while its medium,

makes the person capable of acting well. Thus, Aristotle writes: “It is necessary to say that every virtue both brings that of which it is the virtue into completion and a good condition and also renders the work it does well done, as the excellence of the eye makes both the eye and its work excellent [σπουδαίως], since by means of the excellence of the eye we see well.” See Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, 1106a15–19. Chrétien recognizes the tight connection between tangible perceiving and the ethical mean: “The mean that we are is the measure of extremes, discerning extremes and differentiating them: the hot is always hotter than us, the cold what is colder than our flesh, and similarly for the hard and the soft (*De anima*, 11, 11, and *Meteorology*, IV, 4, 382A 17–21 [. . .]). What is like us is not perceived; we feel only what exceeds us . . . Here as in ethics, the mean is a form of excellence.” See Chrétien, *The Call and the Response*, pp. 99–100.

56 Derrida, *On Touching—Jean-Luc Nancy*, pp. 4–5.

57 Aristotle, *De Anima*, 422b19–23.

58 Aristotle, *De Anima*, 423a2–4.

τὸ μεταξύ, is said to “grow organically upon” the body.⁵⁹ This intimacy of the medium seems also to blur the boundaries between taste and touch; for the tongue “perceives everything tangible with the same part that perceives flavor.”⁶⁰ The tongue, organ of taste, is also, as flesh, the medium of touch.⁶¹ Thus, the power of touch threatens to subvert a coherent and unified account of the powers of perceiving in which the organ, the medium and the object are each properly delineated and mapped onto their proper powers of perceiving.

This unified account is further threatened by yet another *aporia* associated with the medium of touch. Extending the thought experiment of the shrouded body to all manner of elements, Aristotle imagines a world in which touch is impossible because there is always something in-between, be it water or air. In such a world, touch too would be a distal power of perceiving. This leads him directly to consider the question of the unity of the account of the proper powers: “So is the perception of all things similar, or is it different for different powers of perceiving, just as now it seems that taste and touch perceive by contact, but the others from a distance?”⁶² The coherence of the account comes here to poignant crisis, and Aristotle confronts the possibility that each power of perceiving might operate in its own peculiar way. His response, however, is to decisively deny that the powers of perceiving are fundamentally different, but in so doing, he brings to language an understanding of the medium that further fleshes out the nature of perceiving itself. To the possibility that perceiving is different for different perceptive powers, Aristotle says:

59 Aristotle, *De Anima*, 423a15–16. Aristotle writes: ὥστε ἀναγκαῖον τὸ σῶμα εἶναι τὸ μεταξὺ τοῦ ἀπτικῶν προσπεφυκός.

60 Aristotle, *De Anima*, 423a17–18.

61 Aristotle calls the tongue the “most tactile” [ἀπτικωτάτη] of organs, and suggests in the *Parts of Animals* that the flesh of the human tongue, because it is the softest, broadest and most detached, enables us not only to communicate with one another by articulate speech, but also renders humans “the most acutely perceptive [εὐαίσθητότατος] of the other animals” (Aristotle, *Parts of Animals*, 660a11–25). The translation of “εὐαίσθητότατος” as “most acutely perceptive” attempts to articulate the appearance of the prefix “εὐ-” in terms that express the excellence of touch. Contemporary science has fleshed this out further, affirming that the highest densities of mechanoreceptors, those sensory nerve endings that convert mechanical energy into electrical signals in which the central nervous system traffics, “are found in the tongue, lips, palms, fingertips, nipples, clitoris, and the tip of the penis, accounting for the extraordinary sensitivity of these parts of the body.” See Sachs, “The Intimate Sense,” p. 28.

62 Aristotle, *De Anima*, 423b1–3.

But this is not so, but we perceive even the hard and the soft through other things, just as we perceive what is able to make a sound or a sight or a smell; but the latter from far away, and the former from nearby, and thus it escapes our notice; since we perceive them all through a mean [τοῦ μέσου], but in the former case it escapes notice.⁶³

A truth of perceiving that ought not to escape our notice comes to language here with the subtle shift of vocabulary from τὸ μεταξύ, the medium, to τὸ μέσον, the mean.⁶⁴ Michael Golluber touches upon it when he suggests “*Mesou*, which is ambiguous enough to suggest something like ‘medium,’ more precisely means ‘mean,’ lending an element of the cognitive to what otherwise appears to be a merely physical or mechanical account.”⁶⁵ The element of the cognitive to which Golluber appeals here might perhaps better be said to be a dimension of discernment endemic to perceiving itself; for this its critical capacity is what ultimately marks the difference between other living things with the capacity for nourishment and animals who have in addition the perceptive ability to reach out to a world that presents itself as desirable.

The *aporia* of touch has led Aristotle to speak of “the medium” as a kind of “mean,” thus lending voice to the middle voiced dynamic of perceiving itself. Already in the discussion of seeing, the medium was seen to be decisive; for Aristotle had said that Democritus had not spoken beautifully when he claimed there was nothing between the visible object and the power of vision. There Aristotle had insisted that “it is necessary that there be something between

63 Aristotle, *De Anima*, 423b4–8.

64 For the sake of clarity, we have consistently translated τὸ μεταξύ, as the “medium,” although it fails to capture the manner in which Aristotle places a definite article in front of an adverb in order to thematize the nature of what is “between.” We have translated the “between” as “medium” to more effectively capture the manner which Aristotle seems use the term when he is thinking of the relationship of perceiving in material terms. Here, however, τὸ μέσον is translated as “the mean,” although it can mean whatever is between things. This allows us to reserve “the mean condition” for μεσότης, the noun associated with substantive adjective, τὸ μέσον. Polansky recognizes that μέσον “seems the wider term for whatever is between things, whereas the former [μεσότης] is something between extremes and somehow just right or appropriate.” See Polansky, *Aristotle’s De Anima*, p. 333. Polansky and Welton render μέσον as “intermediate” and μεσότης as “mean.” See William Welton and Ronald Polansky, “The Viability of Virtue in the Mean,” *Apeiron* 25/4 (1992), 79–102, here: p. 90 (n15).

65 Michael Golluber, “Aristotle on Knowledge and the Sense of Touch,” *Journal of Philosophical Research* 26 (2001), 655–680, here: p. 668.

[ὥστ' ἀναγκαῖόν τι εἶναι μεταξύ].⁶⁶ But *here* it now seems that Aristotle *there* did not himself speak beautifully, for in criticizing Democritus, Aristotle seems to have overemphasized the “something” that exists between the power of perceiving and the thing perceived. By focusing on the quality of *what* fills the gap between them, he was unable to articulate *how* they hold themselves toward one another. The shift from “the medium” to “the mean,” from “τὸ μεταξύ” to “τὸ μέσον,” enables Aristotle to bring the nature of perceiving to language in relational rather than material terms.⁶⁷

Even if, however, Aristotle here speaks of “the mean” as he attempts to articulate a path through the *aporia* of the medium, he continues to speak of “the medium” in order to reinforce the similarity between tangible, visible and audible things even as he notes a difference:

But tangible things do differ from visible and audible things, for we perceive the latter when the medium acts upon us in some way, but the tangible things not by the medium [ὑπὸ τοῦ μεταξύ] but at the same time as the medium [ἅμα τῷ μεταξύ], just as someone who is struck through a shield; for it is not that the shield, being struck, beats upon one, but at the same time both together [ἅμ' ἄμφω συνέβη] are struck.⁶⁸

The shield example evokes again the thought experiment of the membrane tightly joined to the body. Here, as there, the intimacy of the medium is emphasized; for both together are struck. Here, however, the little word ἅμα further reinforces the intimacy of touch with a term that means “together” and “at once” and thus articulates a mode of relation that is, strictly speaking, neither spatial nor temporal, because simultaneously at the root of both. Derrida has beautifully suggested as much with reference to the appearance of this small word, ἅμα, in the context of Aristotle’s account of time: “This locution is first neither spatial nor temporal. The duplicity of the *simul* to which it refers

66 Aristotle, *De Anima*, 419a20.

67 Polansky recognizes this when he writes: “The sensitive mean is not a quality but a relation like either health or virtue depending upon whether we look toward the sense organ or sense.” See, Polansky, *Aristotle’s De Anima*, p. 333. Marjolein Oele, citing Plessner’s *De Stufen des Organischen und der Mensch*, connects this relational aspect of Aristotle’s understanding of touch to Plessner’s conception of “positionality”—“the relationship that a living being has to its environment by ‘arising in it, depending on it, yet opposing itself to it.’” See Marjolein Oele, “Being Beyond: Aristotle’s and Plessner’s Accounts of Animal Responsiveness,” in *Phenomenology and the Non-Human Animal: At the Limits of Experience*, eds. Corinne Painter and Christian Lotz (Dordrecht, 2007), p. 33.

68 Aristotle, *De Anima*, 423b12–17.

does not yet reassemble, within itself, either points or now, places or phases. It says the complicity, the common origin of time and space, appearing together as the condition for all appearing of Being.”⁶⁹ Although Aristotle returns to the talk of “the medium” in this passage about the shield, the appearance of the little word, ἄμα, and indeed, its repetition to reinforce the manner in which the medium is together with that which is capable of feeling, suggest that the intimacy of touch has uncovered the conditions according to which perceiving itself unfolds. The reciprocal and chiasmic nature of perceiving has thus come to language in the subtle shift in locution from the medium to the mean, and in the articulation of the little word, ἄμα, which together give voice to a way of being together Aristotle himself calls, “τὸ αἰσθάνεσθαι,” to be perceived to. The itinerary of touch has led us to the heart of perceiving.

4 The Heuristics of Touch

Although Aristotle has touched upon the nature of perceiving as a kind of mean, he continues to speak of the medium in order to reinforce the unity of the proper powers of perceiving. Thus, before turning his attention to perceiving as such, Aristotle reaffirms that touch and taste function in the same manner as sight, hearing and smell; for with the contact powers too, “no perception would come into being, if the perceptual organ were touched.”⁷⁰ If touch is to operate like the other powers of perceiving, the organ will need to be located inside the body and the flesh itself must be said to be the medium, τὸ μετὰξὺ.⁷¹ The locution of the medium reappears here and in the passage on the shield so as to reinscribe the power of touch into the community of the other proper powers of perceiving.

69 Jacques Derrida, *Margins of Philosophy* (Chicago, 1982), p. 56. Derrida goes on in this passage to insist that Aristotle does not say this, but he “develops his demonstration in the unnoticed self-evidence of what the locution *hama* says. He says it without saying it, lets it say itself, or rather, it lets him say what he says.” Thus Derrida says, without saying it, something decisive about legomenology; for by attending carefully to “the unnoticed self-evidence of what the locution [...] says,” Derrida is able to discern in the things Aristotle says something of the truth of what is said. That truth itself emerges precisely because Aristotle seeks assiduously to put words to things in ways that do justice to those things.

70 Aristotle, *De Anima*, 423b20–21.

71 Aristotle, *De Anima*, 423b23–26. A very accessible and rather beautiful account of the organ of touch can be found in the discussion of the epidermis and the dermis in Diane Ackerman, *A Natural History of the Senses* (Vintage, 1991), pp. 83–84. For more on the physiology of touch, see Sachs, “The Intimate Sense.”

Yet the intimacy of touch teaches us about the dynamics of perceiving in a way that the other proper powers of perceiving do not. Thus, at the end of the chapter, Aristotle returns to the question of perceiving where its nature as a discriminating power is touched upon and the full significance of the talk of the mean can be felt. Listen first to how perceiving is here said:

For the to be perceived to is a certain being acted upon; with the result that what produces makes another thing, being in potency, the sort of thing that what produces is in activity [τὸ γὰρ αἰσθάνεσθαι πάσχειν τι εἰστίη ὥστε τὸ ποιοῦν, οἷον αὐτὸ ἐνεργεία, τοιοῦτον ἐκεῖνο ποιεῖ, δυνάμει ὄν].⁷²

The passage brings to language the poetics of perceiving. To be perceived to involves a kind of *poiesis* in the middle voice, a suffering as much as a making. We have encountered already perceiving as a peculiar kind of passion, for it is not the standard passion of alteration in which what is changed becomes other than it was, but rather, the sort of being-affected in which what is affected comes into its own being-at-work. Thus, what produces the perception is here said to make that which has the capacity to encounter it the sort of thing that what produces already is. The power of perceiving and the thing perceived become one in the activity of perceiving itself. The result clause shows this in the very manner in which it is declared.⁷³ That which produces is said first to be itself of such a sort in its being at work (τὸ ποιοῦν, οἷον αὐτὸ ἐνεργεία); the power of perceiving is, at the end of the clause, still yet in potency (δυνάμει ὄν); in the middle is the poetics of perceiving by which that which produces the perception makes the power of perceiving the sort of thing the perceived thing is (τοιοῦτον ἐκεῖνο ποιεῖ). *The manner in which the passage is articulated shows* what had been already said in *De Anima* 11.5: “And the ability to perceive is in potency such as the perceived thing is already [ἤδη] in its being-at-work-staying-itself.”⁷⁴ The little word “ἤδη,” “already,” expresses the manner in which what is perceived itself does not, in being perceived, become other than it has always already been. However, the poetics of perceiving is itself said to involve a “certain being acted upon” in the middle voice, suggesting that the perceived thing too undergoes a certain passion. The account of touch already intimated as much by its recognition that what is tangible acts upon

72 Aristotle, *De Anima*, 424a1–2.

73 The term “declare” here is meant to express the Greek λόγος ἀποφαντικός, or the kind of speaking that addresses things by allowing them to show themselves as themselves. For an account of this sense of declaration, see Long, *Aristotle on the Nature of Truth*, 72–76.

74 Aristotle, *De Anima*, 418a3–4.

the medium and the power of tangibility at the same time. There can be no delusion of pure objectivity with touch, for the power of touch puts us in touch with the object touched itself. This encounter always involves an ineluctable dimension of force. As Hans Jonas has suggested: “the contact-situation always involves pressure and therefore a modicum of force as part of the experience.”⁷⁵ Even so, however, in touch that which is perceived relinquishes something of itself to us; we are made to perceive the sort of thing it already is.

Thus, the capacity to perceive is no mere passivity; rather, the power of perceiving itself is an active condition of the soul, a kind of ἕξις that embodies an ἦθος, or character. When, as he seeks to articulate the nature of touch, Aristotle himself touches upon perceiving as a mean, he gives voice to the very ethics of perceiving. Through the *aporia* of touch, we are made to feel the extent to which perceiving is itself a habituated power of the soul. If perceiving is the most primal way animals inhabit the world, in touch we animals feel ourselves habituated to the world. Thus, although Aristotle has been criticized for failing to articulate the active side of touch, what the contemporary psychology of touch calls “haptics,” nevertheless, with his talk of the mean, Aristotle brings the active dimension of touch to language.⁷⁶ Listen:

For we do not perceive [οὐκ αἰσθανόμεθα] that which is as hot or cold, or hard or soft, as we are, but what exceeds us [τῶν ὑπερβολῶν]; for the power of perceiving is a kind of mean condition [μεσότητος] being between the contrary attributes in the things perceived. And because of this, it discerns the things perceived. The mean is capable of discernment, for it comes to be either of the two extremes in relation to the other.⁷⁷

As a mean condition between extreme attributes in things perceived, the hyperbolic power of touch reaches out toward tangible things with an openness capable of discernment. The hyperbolic openness of touch is a kind of readiness to be affected in which the mean condition itself becomes the root

75 Hans Jonas, *The Phenomenon of Life: Toward a Philosophical Biology: Essays* (New York, 1966), p. 140.

76 As Cynthia Freeland rightly mentions, contemporary scientists use the term ‘haptics’ to refer to the active dimension of touch. See Cynthia A. Freeland, “Aristotle on the Sense of Touch,” in *Essays on Aristotle’s De Anima* (Oxford, 1995), p. 236. James J. Gibson traces the vocabulary of “haptics” to the work of G. Revesz on the psychology of the blind, and makes the distinction between active (haptic) and passive touch central to his psychological account of touch. See James J. Gibson, “Observations on Active Touch,” *Psychological Review* 69/6 (1962), 477–491.

77 Aristotle, *De Anima*, 424a2–7.

of the possibility of discernment.⁷⁸ As we have heard, the tongue is perhaps the best illustration of this; for not only does everything taste bitter to the sick person due to an excess of bitter moisture, but also, as the most tactile of organs, the tongue is best able to discern the hot and cold, hard and soft. Indeed, as infants, we find our original way into the world largely through our capacity to touch with our tongue.

What we discern in reaching out to the world, however, is that the world itself presses palpably back upon us, makes itself felt, habituating us to it through touch.⁷⁹ Aristotle's emphasis on the hyperbolic dimension of perceiving suggests that as a mean condition, the power of perceiving is able to perceive what is unlike itself, discerning this as hot only when the temperature of the perceiving being is cooler than that which is perceived. This suggests too, however, that as a mean condition perceiving acclimates us to the world in which we live. Here again the power of touch is felt, though perhaps only in the absence of feeling; consider, for example, the manner in which your finger no longer feels the wedding ring already after only a few months of marriage, or how your body slowly adjusts to the jolting cold of the ocean water.⁸⁰ We get used to it. The world makes itself felt, habituates us to it even as we continue to reach out toward the world, perceiving that which presents itself as sufficiently different from us to activate our perceptive powers.

Here our ability to find our way in the world, our very proprioception—the manner in which we orient our body in the world—is itself conditioned by the reciprocal activity of perceiving in which we reach out to a world receptive to our active capacities to perceive even as the world presses itself upon our perceptive capacities to receive it.⁸¹ Perceiving operates in the middle voice. As a mean condition, the power of perceiving is the peculiar way we animals hold

78 Polansky rightly speaks of this openness endemic to the mean as a kind of relation as opposed to a quality. See Polansky, *Aristotle's De Anima*, p. 333.

79 Barad puts it this way: "Touch moves and affects what it effects." See Barad, "On Touching—The Inhuman That Therefore I Am," p. 208.

80 To illustrate this phenomenon Ackerman appeals to the example of how a wool sweater feels scratchy when we first put it on but "after a while, a touch receptor 'adapts' to the stimuli and stops responding"; we get used to it and no longer notice the sweater we are wearing. See Ackerman, *A Natural History of the Senses*, p. 81.

81 Ratcliffe rightly brings touch into tight connection with proprioception: "If we adopt a phenomenological conception of touch, a distinction between proprioception and touch is, I think, untenable. Touch, extricated from proprioception, would be so impoverished as to bear little resemblance to the rich and heterogeneous phenomenology integral to tactile experience." See Matthew Ratcliffe, "Touch and Situatedness," *International Journal of Philosophical Studies* 16/3 (2008), p. 302.

ourselves toward and with the world. Touch, the most primal power of perceiving, enables us to feel the contours of the power of perceiving itself, which never comes to language in the vernacular of the grasp. The hand, indeed, is conspicuously absent from Aristotle's account of touch where the tongue emerges as its most proper site.⁸²

Thus, in the end, after touching upon the nature of the imagination and thinking in *De Anima* III, Aristotle returns in the final two chapters to the question of touch, reaffirming its primal significance for animal life. There again, he speaks of the mean and the earth and of the contraries that make up the elements of things:

For touch exists as a mean condition [μεσότης] of all tangible things, and its perceptual organ is receptive not only of the various differences there are of the earth, but also of hot and of cold and of all the other tangible things.⁸³

Touch inhabits the space between the living animal and the earth in which we live, putting us in touch with the very elements of things, enabling us to find nourishment and flee danger. As a mean condition situated between the living animal and the life world, touch empowers us to discern the world as it presses itself upon us and impresses us with the vast diversity of its beauty and the swiftness with which it slips away. If, as Aristotle reminds us at the end, without touch it is impossible for the animal to live, still it is through touch that the

82 Aristotle famously likens the soul to a hand which “is the tool of tools [ὄργανόν ἐστιν ὀργάνων].” See Aristotle, *De Anima*, 432a1–2. Chrétien identifies “fingering” with the capacities of the hand to explore the contours of the felt world. Fingering, which Chrétien says is a uniquely human capacity, is not a matter of grasping, but of feeling. In this sense, fingering is the hand’s way of being more like the tongue. Even so, the hand is always too easily tempted to grasp. (However tempted the tongue may be, grasping is not a capacity given to it.) Although the distinction between fingering and grasping is missing from Rosen’s account of touch in Aristotle, nevertheless, Rosen well articulates the tendency of the hand to possess, rather than to identify with its object: “The hand, in grasping the object, may be said to *hold* it, not to *become* it.” Rosen, “Thought and Touch, a Note on Aristotle’s *De Anima*,” p. 134. The concern there for Rosen is the distinction between the mind, which becomes its object, and the hand, which holds its object. Still, the hand’s connection with conceptuality here, with what the Germans call *Der Begriff*—from *begreifen*, to grasp—cannot be denied. Aristotle’s account of touch avoids the logic of the concept and thus the economy of the grasp, obsessed as it is with possession. The incapacity of the tongue to grasp is precisely what makes it the proper site of touch for Aristotle.

83 Aristotle, *De Anima*, 435a21–24.

other powers of perceiving enable us to live well in a world that forever slips from our grasp.⁸⁴ And yet, in the end, as at the beginning, the tongue, the very flesh by which we find our way into the world, enables us to signify beautiful things to one another and thus to touch upon something of the truth the world itself articulates: that we belong to it as much as it belongs to us; that we are able to respond to and with the world and one another in ways that enrich both the world and the lives lived in it; and indeed, that by cultivating our capacities to touch, we might feel our way toward a more intimate connection with the elusive nature of life.

84 Aristotle, *De Anima*, 434b23–4.