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On perceiving

Thinkers have long wondered about what makes us both capable of representing and of perceiving the external world. Previous investigations into the historical origins of how the awareness about these capacities developed showed that any account of the former is predicated on an account of the latter. So, although my research interests do not fall properly in the field of art history, they intersect it because developments in late medieval and renaissance art theory and practice are dependent on developments in late medieval and renaissance theories of perception.¹

Perception, in all its sense modalities but in particular vision and hearing, has received increased scholarly attention for the last decade in the fields of philosophy, psychology and cognitive science. From the perspective of the history of philosophy, this is the result of the traction gained by some particular exegetical questions originating in ancient philosophy, in particular the texts of Aristotle, about the nature of change that takes place in the eyes - and in the organs corresponding to the other sense modalities - upon the contact between the object to be perceived and the subject of perception (an expression that is aimed at including all sentient beings, rational and non rational). Does the eye jelly becomes coloured upon the reception of the form of colour from the coloured external object? The question about the colour in the eye jelly is intended to clarify whether and if so how external material things act upon sentient beings and what is the nature (material or immaterial/spiritual) of this action. Depending on how we answer those questions, others follow: what is the kind of knowledge we have of those objects and their properties, what is the degree of certainty achieved by this knowledge, are these capacities species (human) and even kind (animal) specific thus being affected (/perceive) in the same way, do these perceived properties exit in external things independently of our perception of them, do external things have these properties in the way we perceive them as having? - the list could go on and on because the way an individual thinker answers any of them committees him/her to a certain view of the world and of cognition. Now, as the result of their quest to find the best answer to the question over the nature of the change in the sense organs - i.e. what does it mean to take on the form of the object or of its property (called species or in some cases intentions) - was the overspilling of the debate from ancient sources to medieval ones though the mediation of Arabic authors like Avicenna, Averroes and Alhacen - the later's *De aspectibus* being essential to understand the development of the theory of perspective.

It must be said however that medieval authors, with few exceptions (as there are always with historical sources), were not primarily concerned with perception as such but discussed it when debating topics like intellectual knowledge, the Trinity, or even the human vision of God. The debates focused on the description of the processes (psycho-physiological) by means of which we perceive the world but this description is dependent on an account of how that world - its objects and their properties - is constituted. According to this model, perception is defined by a certain proportionality between the perceptual capacities a perceiver is naturally endowed with and the constituting properties of the perceived objects. This means that things are available to us via a restricted range of perceptible qualities specific to each sense modality and that there must be a correspondence between the kind of property (and the range of its intensity) and the capacity to take in that property: too strong a light and it destroys the sense organ that is able to perceive light (or colour as the effect of light); too dim a light (or in the wrong end of the spectrum) and it cannot be perceived.

¹ Previous studies include David C. Lindberg, *Theories of Vision. From Al-Kindi to Kepler* (The University of Chicago Press 1976); John S. Hendrix, Charles H. Carman (eds.), *Renaissance Theories of Vision* (Ashgate 2010); and Robert S. Nelson (ed.), *Visuality Before and Beyond the Renaissance. Seeing as Others Saw* (Cambridge University Press 2000).

For the (late) medieval mind, all things are constituted by matter - unintelligible on its own - and form which explains why something is what it is (a cat or a tree or a stone) or why it has certain properties (colour, size, shape) - the former were called substantial forms, the latter called accidents/accidental forms. There are no physical things that completely lack accidents, although no thing needs to have a fix set of them; moreover, one can gain some quality (e.g. tan) and still be a human being and this (individual) human being (me, after summer holidays in Portugal). One central issue in this debate is whether the object and its qualities (via the representational devices called species, whatever their ontological status) are enough to cause perceptual acts and to fully determine the content of those acts of perception. Is my seeing red fully dependent and determined by that red object and the species of red it issues forth? Or should a different agent or eliciting cause (e.g. the soul itself) be posited?

Another issue concerns the *content* of cognition and how we get to know the essential aspects/nature/essence of a thing (x), like that it is a human being (/that it instantiates human nature), from the perception of x's accidental features (colour, shape). Any explanation of this transition was reliant on what exactly are the processing powers (faculties) responsible for these operations in the largely independent but not completely modular systems of sense perception (directed at particular material things) and intellectual cognition (directed at universals).² The basic structure consisted in the sensory faculties of common sense (online), imagination (offline) and memory, and the rational faculties of intellect, memory and will, but their number varied greatly from author to author (or even in among different works of the same author: e.g. Avicenna or Albert the Great). Plus, with the multiplication of powers (the estimative and cogitative plus the sub-division of some of the existing faculties) came the issue of demarcating the nature of their objects and operations in order to avoid overlapping or gaps in the process, which added to the complexity of the story.

But this partition of the soul into functionally distinct capacities according to the metaphysical model of powers being defined by their objects created tensions in how the relation between clusters of functions can be explained: how can understanding and sensation, operating at the extreme ends of materiality and immateriality, be functions of one and the same soul? Moreover, medieval thinkers became intrigued, when thinking about angels or human souls in the disembodied state - who had no physical sense organs - how can there be intellectual knowledge (directed as it is to universals) of individual things as such. If things are (intellectually, i.e. with certainty) known by means of abstraction from their material (individuating) conditions (accidental properties), can we *know distinctly and determinately* two very similar individuals of the same species? The way to address these issues was to start with how we perceive sensible qualities - framed in terms of what is the cause of perception and what is the nature of the species by which the quality is made present to the cognitive subject - and move from there adding, along the way, the necessary qualifications.

In the later middle ages, the focus shifted from the mechanics of sense perception to a debate about how we can be certain that we know the way things are or that they are the way we know them to be or even that that which we perceive is something existing in the world. I tend to see this shift as a consequence of the realisation that a passive account of sensory experience - the dominant Aristotelian view - was insufficient to explain the cognition of external things and am particularly interested in investigating the modes of this realisation and the alternative accounts it gave rise to. In addition, a further issue developed about what is the best way to portray them by artistic mastery in a way that conforms to the way things represented are.

² Scholars have mostly offered piecemeal accounts, that is focusing on a particular faculty or a part of the process of cognition: see e.g. for memory, Mary Carruthers, *The Book of Memory* (Cambridge University Press 1990); David Bloch, *Aristotle on Memory and Recollection* (Brill 2007); for the common sense, Pavel Gregoric, *Aristotle on the Common Sense* (Oxford University Press 2007); for overviews, see Ruth Harvey, *The Inward Wits. Psychological Theory in the Middle Ages and the Renaissance* (The Warburg Institute-University of London 1975); Harry Wolfson, "The Internal Senses in Latin, Arabic, and Hebrew Philosophic Texts", *Harvard Theological Review* 28.2 (1935), 69-133. My project aims at a more holistic approach.

In this sense, the renaissance theory of perspective is the development of the medieval theory of species and their transmission through the medium according to the principles of geometrical optics. It is a shift from the reflection on how things are experienced as being to how things are represented to be. We know how the story goes - *the big picture* as people like to say nowadays - but we still need to work a lot on how the dots between these different aspects are actually connected in a way that is truthful to the historical evidence. My research project entitled *Rationality in Perception: Transformations of Mind and Cognition 1250-1550*, which is funded by an European Research Council starting grant and is hosted at the Faculty of Arts of the University of Helsinki, looks at some of these and related issues in order to bring some better understanding of this dynamic period - we have moved a long way from the 'dark age' take of the medieval period. But, did I tell about perceptual illusions?³

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