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Perception in Aristotle's Ethics

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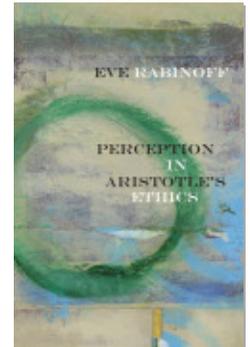
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INTRODUCTION

The project I have undertaken is to account for ethical perception (*aisthēsis*) in Aristotle's ethics—to give perception a place of importance in ethical reasoning, choice, and action—and to offer an account of the faculty of perception that is expansive enough to include reception of the ethical significance of particulars. This project is motivated philosophically both by particular features of Aristotle's thought and more generally by an increasing philosophical awareness that the ethical agent is an embodied, situated individual, rather than primarily a disembodied, abstract rational will. Traditionally, the human soul (*psuchē*) or human nature has been understood to have a nonrational part characterized by desires and perceptions and a rational part characterized by thinking, knowledge, and argument (*Nic. Eth.* 1102a26–28). Depending on how the relationship between these two sides is conceived, the nonrational side is either a bane to be controlled (or ignored) by the rational side, or it plays an irreducible role in contributing to moral choice and action. By establishing and accounting for perception's place in ethics, I seek to show the importance for ethical life of integrating both elements of human nature, the rational and nonrational, the human and the animal.

Aristotelian Motivations: Perception and Intellect

Aristotle is famous for offering what might be called a situational ethics: discerning what one ought to do is not derivable from universal laws, but must be assessed with respect to the very particulars that make up the situation in which one must act. Famously, Aristotle argues that what virtue calls for is acting and feeling in an appropriate manner; that is, at the right time, to the right degree, in the right manner, with respect to the right people, and so on (*Nic. Eth.* 1106b21–24). Moreover, because of the situational specificity of right action, one must also have the right *character* in order to discern what virtue calls for—only the virtuous person sees what is truly good. If one has a faulty character, the particulars will appear in a distorted manner, just as the wine tastes bitter to those who are ill (1113a25–29).

It appears that a consequence of the situational specificity of virtuous action is that in order to be virtuous one must *see* rightly, in a literal sense.

Aristotle is consistent in designating perception (*aisthēsis*) as the faculty that apprehends the particular (*De anima* 417b21–29; *Nic. Eth.* 1109b23, 1113a1–2, 1126b4, 1142a27, 1143b6, 1147a27, 1147b18). Moreover, if those who are not virtuous cannot discern instances of virtuous action as virtuous (as a person who is ill cannot taste wine as sweet), this means that there is a limit to what the powers of intellect can accomplish with regard to virtuous action, for if virtue were simply a matter of understanding, whether one does or does not have the right character should not matter. Discerning virtuous action, then, seems to be a matter of *perception*.

This consequence, however, carries some difficulties with it. In the first place, it appears to contradict the very definition of virtue as the excellent activity of the rational part of the soul (*Nic. Eth.* 1098a11–18). This definition suggests that it is not *perception*, a faculty of the nonrational part of the soul shared with animals (1098a1–3), that determines what is virtuous, but intellect and reason. In the second place, Aristotle conceives of perception as a bodily power in an important way: it is a power that operates with sense organs that are impacted (physically) by the objects of sense (via a medium). But it would be strange to consider *goodness* (or justice, or temperance, etc.) as a physical object capable of impacting the sense organs and producing perception. Aristotle seems to be in a theoretical bind: perception is the faculty that discerns the particulars, yet it is not equipped to discern *ethical* particulars. There are two ways one might get Aristotle out of this bind. One way is to give perception a merely instrumental role in the discernment of ethical particulars, where it is by the judgment of intellect upon the data provided by perception that one apprehends ethical particulars. If one adopts this strategy, one maintains that it is indeed the rational part of the soul that discerns virtuous action. Another way out of the bind is to offer an account of perception such that it *is* receptive to ethical particulars. Adopting this strategy straightforwardly resolves the second difficulty, but is left with the first. Despite this, I adopt this latter strategy. I will first offer reasons why the first strategy fails, and then I will offer a way out of the bind of seeming to make virtue a nonrational excellence.

Say that perception offers only what it can, objects of sense such as color, sound, shape, number, and so on (*De anima* 418a7–20), which intellect interprets using its own categories and thereby discerns the ethical relevance of particulars. This strategy fails on two accounts. First, if it were the case that perception is merely instrumental, providing the data to be interpreted by intellect, there would be no reason that virtuous action would not be subject to universal formulae. The discernment of the particular, ethical or not, would just be subsuming that particular under a certain category (for

example, colorful shape is an instance of “person”), and if the discernment of the *particular* is an application of a category, why would the discernment of the virtuous action not also be the application of a category? If, in other words, all ethical information were in the province of intellect—if there were nothing ethical to be supplied by another faculty—the discernment of the virtuous act would be a matter of subsuming particulars under general ethical categories, that is, rules. But Aristotle insists that this is not the case, and this implies that there is something *ethical* that is out of the reach of intellect by itself. To render perception instrumental does not do justice to Aristotle’s insistence on the situatedness of ethical discernment.

Second, and more generally, if all perception apprehended were colors, shapes, and so on, it seems that it would provide too little information to be the basis for intellectual judgment. Intellect would indeed be a powerful faculty if it could sort out what would be the “blooming, buzzing confusion” offered by the perception of shapes, sounds, colors, and so on. How would intellect single out objects such as tables and chairs among such perceptual data, let alone people, friends, and enemies? To render perception merely instrumental does not do justice to the complexity of perceptual experience.

The instrumentalist may respond by pointing out that, in addition to sounds and shapes, Aristotle lists incidental perceptibles such as the son of Diares among the objects of perception (*De anima* 418a20–24). So, the instrumentalist might say, perception offers such sophisticated information as that this colorful shape is the particular person, the son of Diares, but nonetheless intellect is required to judge that the son of Diares is or is not the appropriate target for generosity (for example). But even allowing that perceptual data is complex does not avoid the problem of explaining why general ethical rules cannot be formulated. Presumably one would *judge* that the son of Diares is not the appropriate target for generosity on the basis of some rule, such as “one ought not to be generous to one who has an abundance of wealth” (and the son of Diares is such a person).

Aristotle resists the formulation of ethical rules for the reason that ethical action concerns the particular, and there is much variability in particulars (*Nic. Eth.* 1094b16–18, 1104a3–5, 1141b16, 1140b1–3). The idea seems to be that one must be prepared to act *contrary* to a general rule or to one’s prior deliberation, should the situation call for it (1104a5–10). This means that the virtuous action is *always* a matter of situational discernment, of being able to tell whether this particular situation is one in which one should abide by one’s deliberation (as, for example, Neoptolemus seems to do [1151b17–21]). In so doing, Aristotle maintains the possibility that the particular situation be *surprising*, be unpredictable, unavailable to the kind of foreknowledge that

intellect may provide. I don't see how one can maintain this and still maintain that perception is merely instrumental to intellect's reasoning.

Let me offer some examples of the sort of thing I think Aristotle is protecting by maintaining that virtuous action is not articulable in rules. It is a common experience: stage fright. One may *know* exactly what one must do—recite the Gettysburg Address, say—and one may be fully prepared to do it. But it is still possible that one finds oneself speechless at the very moment one is to perform one's task. Or, to offer a positive example, one may be fully prepared for an interview, having had the questions in advance, and one need only to recite one's answers in a lively manner when the time comes. When the time does come, one is struck by inspiration and offers a new answer. Similarly, a dancer may practice her performance to perfection and will perform it perfectly on stage, yet these two performances, the practice and the recital, are quite significantly different acts for the dancer. What these examples show is that a present reality has a force that cannot be known intellectually in advance; the particulars one actually faces in action have an irreducible impact on one that can only be experienced. This, I suggest, is the sort of thing that Aristotle is protecting by resisting the formulability of ethical rules and maintaining that perception discerns the particular. Being fully prepared to act virtuously by having all the principles and being able to enact them just is not the same as actually acting virtuously; knowing what to do is not the same as doing it, and what makes the difference must come from the perception of particular, present circumstances.

For these reasons, I opt to get Aristotle out of his bind by offering an account of human perception such that it is receptive of ethical particulars, by which I mean that human perception is able to apprehend particulars in their significance to virtuous action. For example, when one sees a person in distress one perceives this as an occasion for courage. This is a *perception*, not a judgment that courage is necessary here.

But this strategy saddles me with the first difficulty in maintaining that perception apprehends ethical particulars, namely, that this appears to make virtue not excellent rational activity but excellent nonrational, perceptual activity. To avoid this, I propose a shift in perspective and in the meanings of "rational" and "nonrational." Rather than consider perception abstractly, outside of the context of a human soul and a human life, I consider perception as an integrated part of the intellectual soul. This holistic perspective enables me to offer an account of intellectual perception: a way of perceiving that is informed by intellectual accomplishments. For example, reading or hearing speech in one's native language is a kind of intellectual perception. The words on the page are perceptually intelligible—even when drunk or asleep,

when intellect is dormant, one comprehends words. Yet one must *learn* the language in order for such perceptual comprehension to occur. I suggest that human perception generally and ethical perception specifically is a similarly intellectually informed perception.

This avoids the problem of virtue being discerned by a nonrational capacity because intellectual perception *is* rational—it is infused, so to speak, with intellect. The nonrational perceptual part of the soul is fully integrated with the intellectual part. Given this integration, I suggest that it is better that we say that the virtuous *soul* is rational, and virtue is the activity of the whole soul in cooperation. This way of understanding virtue aligns with Aristotle's claims that the soul of the virtuous person is in harmony with itself (*Nic. Eth.* 1102b26–28), and that the virtues are inseparable from one another (1144b32–1145a2).

Scholarly Motivations: Perception and Moral Psychology

Aristotle's account of perception has been the subject of much scholarly work focusing on *De anima*, and much scholarly work has been done on Aristotle's moral psychology, focusing on the ethical writings. My hope is that this project will contribute to this impressive body of scholarly work by offering a new perspective from which to view issues of moral psychology, one rooted in the account of the soul given in *De anima*.

One fundamental question in Aristotle's moral psychology concerns the relationship between reason and desire in determining the goals of action (and more generally the relationship between the virtues of character and the intellectual virtues). Near the end of book VI of the *Nicomachean Ethics*, Aristotle remarks, "virtue makes the target right, *phronēsis* the things toward the target" (1144 a7–9), and "It is clear that there will be no correct choice in the absence of *phronēsis*, nor in the absence of virtue; for the latter makes one do the end, the former the things toward it" (1145a7–9).¹ As Jessica Moss points out in an illuminating paper, the straightforward interpretation of this as saying that the virtue of the nonrational part of the soul (virtue of character) makes the aim right, and the virtue of the rational part of the soul responsible for practical thinking, *phronēsis*, merely contributes toward that aim, unsettles many commentators.² The worry is that if intellect does not set the aims, it then falls to desire to do so, and then Aristotle would be claiming that we act for the sake of something not because it is *good* but because we *desire* it.

Moss aims to avoid such worries and still maintain the straightforward interpretation of these passages. She identifies a mistake that lies at the base

of this Humean idea: the identification of nonrational with noncognitive. She blocks this identification by arguing that virtue of character involves a nonrational *cognition* of something as good, and this is what sets the end, and that practical intellect reasons only about things toward the end. By blocking the move from nonrational to desire, she saves Aristotle from being a Humean about motivation and maintains the straightforward reading of the passages.

I am sympathetic to Moss's argument, but I think there is more to the worry about nonrational elements setting the goal than is addressed by her solution. Such a claim would seem to turn upside-down Aristotle's notion of the hierarchy of the capacities of soul. For Aristotle, thinking and intellect are better and nobler than the nonrational elements of soul (*Nic. Eth.* 1177a12–17), and to say that intellect is instrumental or subordinate to nonrational cognition would seem to contradict this basic Aristotelian principle. Aristotle brings up this kind of worry in the very discussion in which the passage appears: he notices that "it would seem strange if *phronēsis*, though inferior to wisdom [*sophia*], will exercise greater authority than it, for what makes or produces each thing rules over and arranges that thing" (1143b33–35). It would be equally strange for nonrational cognition to exercise greater authority over rational cognition in deciding the aims of action.

My hope is to contribute to this kind of disagreement about Aristotle's moral psychology by introducing a third option, a different way of conceiving of the soul. Worries about whether what sets the goal is rational or nonrational may be resolved if we take seriously the merely heuristic nature of this division of the soul in the *Nicomachean Ethics* (1102a26–28). If, instead, one keeps in mind the unity of the soul that Aristotle argues for in *De anima*, on my interpretation, then we may see virtue as the good state of the whole soul, rather than separate virtues for separate parts. If, say, the nonrational cognition that sets the goals is informed by intellect, the sort of thing I argue perception is, then we are in a position to say that it *is* intellect that decides the ends, but it does so *as* mediated by perception. The sharp distinction between rational and nonrational falls away, and with it the worry about the nonrational part of the soul setting the ends.

Philosophical Motivations and Promise: Modern and Contemporary Ethics

The project of giving an account of ethical perception in Aristotle is motivated not only by Aristotle and Aristotelian scholarship, but also more generally by a phenomenon that is receiving considerable philosophical

attention right now. This is the phenomenon of unintentionally behaving in ways that betray one's actively and explicitly held beliefs. Freud was influential in bringing this kind of phenomenon to light—we even call slips of the tongue “Freudian slips”—but it was something Augustine struggled with long before, famously characterizing his youthful prayers as: “grant me chastity, but not yet.” Currently, the phenomenon is gaining prominence in studies of implicit bias. Implicit bias is a bias manifest in behaviors but not in explicit awareness; similarly, alief “is a mental state with associatively linked content that is representational, affective and behavioral, and that is activated—consciously or nonconsciously—by features of the subject's internal or ambient environment.”² To act on the basis of implicit bias or alief is to act in a way that is responsive to features of one's environment that one is not cognizing in an explicit way; one's way of being in the world runs contrary to one's thoughts about how one is in the world. This is an issue that Aristotle saw and addressed in his analysis of *akrasia*, “lack of restraint,” which he characterizes as acting contrary to what one knows to be good out of a kind of ignorance (*Nic. Eth.* VII.3). I will argue in a later chapter that to behave akratically is to behave on the basis of a faulty way of perceiving things. One may perceive in a way that contradicts what one thinks, and although one may not even be aware of the discrepancy, one's way of perceiving influences one's way of acting.

In a similar vein, moral philosophies inspired by Iris Murdoch and defended and elaborated more recently by Lawrence Blum (1994) oppose rule-based ethical theories by emphasizing the necessity to first *perceive* a situation as a moral one if one is to make any kind of moral judgment at all. One's moral behavior does not issue simply from one's rational reflection upon it, but importantly from one's sensitivity and way of responding perceptually and emotionally to one's particular circumstances. Being in possession of a principle is not sufficient for moral judgment or action; one must first be attuned to the particulars such that one may discern the moral action that is appropriate. Otherwise, one may fail to act at all or may act contrary to one's principle, unintentionally.

It would be fruitful to study Aristotle with these issues in mind because Aristotle addresses these issues with a unique orientation toward the phenomenon of life as a natural phenomenon. Blum and Murdoch explicitly respond to and oppose typically modern moral theories (such as Kantian deontology) that identify the moral perspective as a third-person, impersonal perspective.³ This impersonal perspective reflects a Cartesian notion of the self as the cogito, the disembodied rational mind. For the Cartesian self, the body is a nonessential appendage, and its associated emotions and

perceptions are to be controlled by the rational will. It follows naturally from this that self-restraint becomes a mark of virtue.⁴

Aristotle takes a decidedly different view of what the ethical subject is, rejecting the idea that self-restraint (*enkrateia*) is virtue. Instead, the virtuous person is one whose soul is in harmony with itself and for whom acting virtuously is not a struggle with the passions but is instead effortless, a second nature. The development of virtue does not occur naturally, but once developed it resembles a natural phenomenon insofar as virtue harnesses and organizes the powers of the soul. In the same way that a mature deer is fully capable of scavenging for food, jumping, running, and so on, so too is the virtuous person able to perform well all the activities that constitute a good human life. Since the activities that constitute a good human life include such nonrational activities as perceiving, emoting, eating and drinking, in addition to the rational ones of thinking, deliberating, contemplating, and so on, there is no reason for Aristotle to privilege the rational at the *expense* of the bodily and the emotions associated with it. A body in a good condition is, for Aristotle, an element of a virtuous life, as is perceiving and emoting well. Because of Aristotle's orientation to natural life, his ethical account may take in all the phenomena of human life. Moral philosophies that reject the restriction of moral phenomena to the explicitly rational and embrace the nonrational and particular elements of moral reasoning and action would do well to consider Aristotle's approach to ethics on the model of natural life.

In Alasdair MacIntyre's recent work, *Dependent Rational Animals*, he develops and defends a notion of animal rationality and develops an ethics emphasizing human dependency that integrates animality into human flourishing. Although this work is not focused on Aristotle's texts, it is an Aristotelian account of virtue and human life, and it is an account that I see my project supporting. MacIntyre develops an account of nonlinguistic rationality that animals employ in pursuing their own goods, which serves as the basis for the development, in humans, of linguistic and reflective rationality. My account of intellectual perception highlights a similar congruence between humans and animals—human rationality *encompasses* animal rationality; it is not different in kind. MacIntyre focuses on the ethical *development* of practical rationality, arguing that such development is possible only on the basis of a primary dependency on others. Similarly, if I am right to give perception an important role in ethical life, moral development will include developing one's ways of perceiving, which, as the phenomenon of implicit bias attests, is not as simple as deciding to see otherwise.



Ultimately, the thesis of this book is that developing one's perceptual capacity such that it comes to be intellectually informed is an important and necessary component of being virtuous and acting virtuously. To establish this, I will first discuss the perceptual capacity, both in itself (chapter 1), as Aristotle analyzes it in his psychological works, and as a part of the human soul (chapter 2). Second, I will discuss the role that perception plays in our ethical lives, both in a poorly habituated soul (chapter 3) and in a virtuous soul (chapter 4). I will conclude with some comments on the nature of ethical development.

Chapter 1 lays the groundwork for the account of ethical perception that is developed in the later chapters by discussing Aristotle's account of the perceptual part of the soul and the powers that he attributes to it. Perception must have two features if it is to be capable of apprehending ethical particulars: first, it must be able to apprehend more than the material qualities of particular objects, such as shape and color. It must be able to apprehend concrete individuals, such as Socrates. Second, it must be able to apprehend present particulars in light of futural concerns. In this chapter, I argue that both of these features are to be found in Aristotle's account of perception. I argue that concrete particulars such as Socrates are genuine objects of perception and that the secondary perceptual power of *phantasia* expands the temporal horizons of presently perceived objects.

The first chapter addresses the perceptual part of the soul, and the second chapter situates that part into a human soul, an intellectual soul, and argues that the nature of perception changes by virtue of being an integrated part of an intellectual soul. I first address the structure of the soul, and especially Aristotle's claim that the parts of the soul are in the soul *potentially*. I argue that this means that the parts are functionally incomplete in the sense that their activity is dependent upon the activity of higher parts of the soul. In light of this structure, I argue that human perception—in a well-developed soul—is informed by intellect. I offer an interpretation of incidental perception that supports this notion, while maintaining that incidental perception in humans is of a kind with that of nonrational animals.

The second chapter develops an account of the structure of the soul as an integrated whole of parts. This third chapter addresses a difficulty for this interpretation with respect to the human soul: Aristotle sustains the possibility that intellect is separable from the rest of the soul in a way that the other parts of soul are not. I address this difficulty, arguing that this separability is the basis for the ethical task of developing virtue—it is because the human

soul is not a natural whole that human beings must develop the harmony of soul in which virtue consists. Ultimately, this means that the development of virtue requires the integration of the perceptual and the intellectual parts of the soul. I confirm this interpretation with an analysis of the phenomenon of *akrasia*, wherein a person suffers from a divided soul.

The fourth and final chapter further confirms the analysis of virtue and the task of ethical development given in the previous chapter and fleshes out the nature of ethical perception by offering an account of the intellectual virtue of *phronēsis*, “practical wisdom.” This is a virtue that bridges the intellectual virtues and the virtues of character, and provides us with a window onto the harmonious, virtuous soul. In this chapter, I address the question of how virtuous action is accomplished in a particular situation of action. I argue that a condition for acting well, and for reasoning well about how to act, is perceiving the particulars of one’s situation as occasions for acting. This, I argue, is one aspect of the virtue of practical wisdom—it is to have one’s perceptual soul well aligned with the intellect.