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Perception in Aristotle's Ethics

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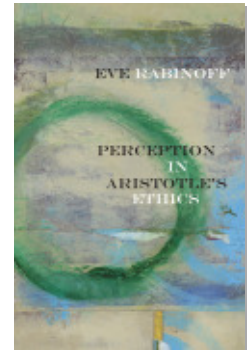
Published by Northwestern University Press

Rabinoff, Eve.

Perception in Aristotle's Ethics.

1 ed. Northwestern University Press, 2018.

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CONCLUSION

Recapitulation

We set out to offer an account of ethical perception in Aristotle's philosophy, drawing primarily on the *De anima* and the *Nicomachean Ethics*. In order to do this, it had to be established first that perception is a robust enough capacity to apprehend particulars in their relevance to ethical life, which was the work of the first two chapters. We saw in the first chapter that perception is a part of the soul consisting in the basic powers to perceive special, common, and incidental perceptibles—colors, shapes, and concrete particulars—which make possible secondary powers, especially *phantasia* and memory. Furthermore, these secondary powers enrich the content of the basic powers of perception, situating the present perception in a temporal context of a continuous life. Most importantly, memory and *phantasia* make it possible to perceive concrete particulars as occasions for action. This understanding of the perceptual part of the soul established that perception is a robust capacity that far exceeds the bare perceptions of sensory objects which is to be interpreted by another faculty. Rather, perception is inherently interpretive and interpreted.

The work of the first chapter established that perception is a faculty that in principle can apprehend particulars in their ethical significance, but it is not the whole story. The account of perception offered there covers both human and nonhuman animals, but ethics is a uniquely human concern. The second chapter took up the question of how human perception might differ from nonhuman animal perception by taking a step back and looking at the perceptual part of the soul from the perspective of the soul as a whole. Here it was established that, in a fully developed soul, the perceptual part of the soul is *potentially* in the intellectual soul. This means that human perception is informed by intellect in the sense that it influences what a perceptual object is perceived *as*; one's understanding influences the way one perceives. Moreover, the intellect's influence on perception frees perception from being simply relative to the perceiver, as it is in nonrational animals. A nonrational animal is confined to perceive concrete particulars as pleasant and painful for it, whereas a rational animal may perceive concrete particulars as they are in themselves, including whether they are good or bad, rather than merely good or bad *for* the perceiver.

The first two chapters established that Aristotle's account of perception is able to accommodate the perception of particulars in their ethical significance, as good or bad in themselves and as occasions to act. The following two chapters sought to secure the importance of ethical perception in Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics* by showing that virtuous action requires ethical perception, and that ethical development consists in the achievement of the harmony of the intellectual and perceptual parts of the soul. The third chapter undertook the latter task. It was established that humans are uniquely ethical creatures because they are uniquely responsible for the completion of their own natures. The psychological ground for this unique feature is the separability of intellect—intellect is not necessary for mere living, but it is necessary for living a good life. As a result, one can come to *know* the sort of acts that virtue consists in, but one may still be unable to *do* it because one's perceptual soul is fully capable of producing action independently of intellect. This interpretation of the natural separability of intellect from the perceptual part of the soul was confirmed in the phenomenon of *akrasia*. The akratic suffers from a divided soul, and we saw that akratic action stemmed from perceiving in a way divorced from intellect. Specifically, the akratic perceives concrete particulars as merely pleasant or painful, not as good or bad, and as a result she perceives them as occasions for acting on the basis of the mere present, rather than on the basis of the good life.

The final chapter further confirmed the importance of ethical perception by addressing that virtue necessary for all the rest: *phronēsis*. It was established there that *phronēsis* is, in part, the ability to perceive particulars correctly as the site for virtuous action. Furthermore, the nature of intellect's impact on the perceptual part of the soul was clarified: ethical perception consists in the transformation of the mean of perception that marks out a range of pleasure and pain into an *ethical* mean, such that what is perceived as pleasant or painful accords with what is good or bad.

Ethical Development

Ethical perception, then, is the capacity to perceive particulars accurately as occasions for virtuous action. It is accomplished by bringing the perceptual part of the soul into harmony with the intellectual. Of course, this raises the question of *how* such a transformation is accomplished. It would take another book to answer this question fully, not least because the answer requires a careful study of Aristotle's *Politics* and an account of the precise relationship between that work and the *Nicomachean Ethics*, and an account of the relationship of the *polis* to the individual. Nevertheless, it is

appropriate to make some general remarks about how ethical perception may be developed.

The difference between an undeveloped, “natural” perception and a developed, ethical perception is the difference between an idiosyncratic perspective in which what happens to *appear* good (i.e., pleasant) is assumed to actually *be* good and a more sophisticated perspective in which what appears good *is* good, and not merely pleasant. This is a difference between a person who is blind to her perspective—who thinks something is good because it appears so to her, regardless of whether or not she is in a good position to make such a determination—and one who is aware that she operates with a perspective. The former is a person who insists that there is something wrong with her food despite the fact that she has an illness that affects the way things taste to her; the latter is she who understands the distortions illness brings about, even when she herself is ill. To develop the capacity for ethical perception, then, requires that one be brought out of the naturally self-relative orientation that serves well for the survival of nonrational animals but hinders the pursuit of the good life of human beings.

Aristotle expresses how important being habituated well in one’s feelings of pleasure and pain (which, as we have seen, are activities of the perceptual part of the soul) is to the development of virtue many times in the *Nicomachean Ethics* (1095b3–6, 1103b22–25, 1104b8–13, 1142a11–22, 1179b4–31). Generally speaking, Aristotle espouses two mechanisms by which this childhood habituation of passion happens: by the force of law and by imitation (especially musical imitation). Law and imitation share one feature: both serve to draw a person out of her personal perspective. Law does this by orienting an individual toward the good of the whole, and by insisting that the good of the whole is better and more important than the good of any individual part. In *Politics* I.2 Aristotle argues that the city (*polis*) as a whole is prior to the families and individuals that are its parts (1253a18–28). In III.4, he defines the virtue of a citizen relative to the good of the whole (1276b20–31), and finally in VIII.1 Aristotle argues that the legislator ought to concern himself with education because “the whole city has one end [*telos*] . . . [and] of common things, the training too must be common” (1337a21–27).¹ Following the law, then, requires that one recognize a good that is distinct from one’s private feelings of pleasure and pain, and, rather than take one’s own idiosyncratic perspective (i.e., feelings of pleasure and pain) to determine what is good or bad, obedience to the law requires adopting a perspective from which one is beholden to a greater good. Obedience to the law requires that one act not out of one’s naturally selfish perspective, but out of a perspective on the good of the whole.

Aristotle introduces the importance of good laws with regard to the development of virtue at the conclusion of the *Nicomachean Ethics*, where he reiterates that being habituated well to feel pleasure and pain rightly is a necessary condition for developing virtue, just as it is necessary to till the soil for it to be receptive of seed (1179b23–26). He continues, “In general, passion seems to yield not to speech [*logos*] but to force. So there must first be an underlying character that is somehow appropriate for virtue, one that feels affection for the noble and disgust for the shameful” (1179b28–31). Law, Aristotle argues, has the force necessary to train the passions because it offers no object for the passions to direct themselves against (1180a18–24). In the *Rhetoric* Aristotle determines that anger is necessarily addressed to a particular person, “such as Cleon, and not just at a human being, and because that person has done something” (1378a32–b1).² For this reason, if an individual were to compel a young person to act contrary to her passions, the young person would get angry and this would obstruct the habituation to feel pleasure in what is noble and good. But the law offers no such object for anger, and so has the kind of force appropriate to habituate the passions (*Nic. Eth.* 1180a18–24).

Law is an impersonal force, which is why it is suitable to shape the passions. On the one hand, this is because rebellious passions require a person against whom to act, if they are to produce actions contrary to the law. The law is not the sort of thing one can be angry with and so purposively act against. On the other hand, breaking the law exacts punishment, so if one *does* break the law in order to pursue one’s personal pleasure, one is then made to suffer pain. As a result, one comes to associate pain with the acts contrary to the law, and pleasure with the lawful acts. If the laws are good ones, this amounts to becoming habituated to feel pleasure in the right things and pain in the wrong ones.

However, this habituation takes two forms. A young person may either be habituated to follow the law out of a desire to act for the sake of the noble (*Nic. Eth.* 1180a5–8) and out of a sense of the shameful of acting contrary to reason (*logos*) (1179b7–11), or out of a sense of fear of retribution (1179b10–16) and pain (1180a8–12). If one is habituated only in the latter way, one is only superficially good and not truly virtuous. One maintains the self-relative perspective, where breaking the law is bad because it appears so to oneself, that is, causes one pain. If one is habituated in the former way, one is prepared for virtue because one sees that to act contrary to the law (assuming the law is good) is to act in a way that is *bad*, not merely in a way that causes pain.

What accounts for these distinct manners of habituation caused by the law? Two answers can be gleaned from Aristotle’s text. First, one may be

habituated only to fear punishment simply because of having a deficient nature:

For the many obey the governance of necessity more than of speech [*logos*], and of punishments more than of what is noble. Hence some suppose that legislators ought to encourage people in the direction of virtue and exhort them to act for the sake of what is noble, on the grounds that those who have been decently guided beforehand by means of habits will be obedient, whereas those who are disobedient and *too deficient in nature* [*aphuēs*], they suppose the legislators ought to inflict on them various chastisements as well as acts of vengeance; the wholly incurable, they ought to banish. For, they suppose, someone who lives decently, with a view to what is noble, will be obedient to the governance of speech [*logos*], whereas someone who strives for pleasure in a base manner must be chastised by means of pain, *like a beast of burden*. (*Nic. Eth.* 1180a4–12, my emphases)

The second reason for the difference in how the law habituates different people can be gleaned from Aristotle's discussion of education in the *Politics*. In *Politics* VIII, Aristotle argues that childhood education ought to be legislated (1337a11–27), and he distinguishes between the education appropriate for the leisured class and the education appropriate to the wage-earning class (1337b4–21). Those of the leisured class are educated in music, which contributes to the formation of character by virtue of being imitative (1340a70b13). The imitative character of music is an agent of habituation of the passions because

music happens to be something pleasant, and since virtue concerns taking pleasure aright and liking and disliking, then it is clear that there is need of nothing so much as learning and getting habituated to judging aright and taking pleasure in decent characters and noble deeds; there are likenesses to be found in rhythms and tunes that are very close to real natures—likenesses of anger and mildness, of courage too and moderation, of all their opposites as well, and of the other qualities of character (the facts themselves make the matter clear, for we undergo changes in the soul when we listen to such rhythms and tunes); and getting used to taking pain and pleasure in likenesses is close to being in the same state with respect to the reality (for instance, if someone takes pleasure in seeing another's

image for no other reason than that that form is the same, then he must also find pleasant the view of that very thing whose image he is viewing). (*Pol.* 1340a14–28)

There are two important claims here about how music habituates the passions. First, music operates directly on the passions, without the mediation of *logos* or law. Hearing music of a certain sort produces feelings of pleasure while music of another sort produces feelings of pain. Second, music *imitates* real things, and so habituates the soul not only to feel pleasure and pain at certain kinds of music, but also to feel pleasure and pain at the sorts of things the music imitates. For example, a violent piece of music will produce feelings of pain, and as a result real violent episodes will similarly produce feelings of pain. But by law only the leisured class will receive this musical education, and so only the leisured class will be habituated by law in the appropriate manner.

Aristotle singles out imitative music as an especially important element in character development, but he considers imitation generally to be an important educative tool. In the *Poetics* he remarks, “For just as to imitate is natural to human beings from childhood (and in this they differ from the rest of the animals in that they are the most imitative and do their first learning through imitation), so also is it natural for everyone to take pleasure in imitation” (1448b5–9).³ In this text, Aristotle is speaking primarily about looking at imitative art, rather than imitating another’s behavior, and the pleasure taken in imitation is because “in their contemplating there is a coincidence of learning and figuring out what each thing is, for example, ‘That’s him!’ since if by chance one has not seen it before, it will not *qua* imitation produce pleasure” (1448b15–18). The pleasure taken in seeing an imitation derives from the recognition that an appearance signifies a reality, that a photograph is of one’s father, for example. It is a pleasure in seeing through the mere appearance, and insofar as imitations are pleasant in this way, one who learns through imitation will become habituated to take pleasure in the reality of things, rather than the mere appearance. Imitation, then, also draws a person out of her private, personal perspective that takes mere appearance to be the whole truth and initiates that person into a perspective from which what is true can be identified through its appearance.

Of course, being law abiding (for the right reasons) and taking pleasure in imitation are not the same as being virtuous—these are the tools by which to develop virtue. Learning through imitation and abiding by the law cultivate the soul so that it is ready to be brought into harmony with intellect—to be obedient to reason—as one comes into maturity. Both law and imitation

prepare the soul for becoming virtuous by changing the person's attitude toward what appears to her to be true. Law does this by introducing the distinction between what is merely good for oneself and the greater good of the whole, and by habituating one to pay heed to that greater good, regardless of the pleasure and pain to oneself; and imitation does this by directly habituating one to feel pleasure and pain at the right things, and more generally by habituating one to take pleasure in seeing what is true behind appearances. Being habituated in this manner clears the path for intellect to inform the perceptual part of the soul—the part responsible for the way particulars appear—by removing the authority of mere appearance. Thus, when a well-habituated person learns that it is truly bad to overindulge on sweets, she will not be persuaded by the appearance of the present doughnut as pleasant. Instead, she will be ready to see beyond that appearance and to pay heed to the true good, health. With further learning and further habituation, she will cease to even see the doughnut as something good and desirable.

I conclude with a comment about what I see to be the central insight of Aristotle's ethics. The insight is expressed in Aristotle's observation that virtue comes about neither by nature nor contrary to nature, but is present in those who are of a nature to receive it and is completed through habit (*Nic. Eth.* II.1 1103a24). This insight captures the unique nature of human life, which exceeds what is natural while being irrevocably situated within nature. What this means is that human life is neither simply up to us nor simply granted to us. Instead, living a good human life requires navigating the natural, taking up what is granted to us, and making it human and thereby good. The perceptual part of the soul is the centerpiece of this ambiguity of human nature: it is a natural capacity, shared with other natural creatures, but it is called upon to exceed its nature in perceiving particulars in their ethical significance. Ethical perception is just such a natural capacity that has been transformed into something human and something good.

