Commentary on Price

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As Anthony Price says, nothing could be clearer about Aristotle’s explanation of perception than that it has both a material and a formal description.

Anger has two aspects, mental and physical (in our sense of those terms) formal and material: there is a ‘desire for retaliation or something of the sort’ which interests the dialectician as the form of anger, and the ‘boiling of the blood and hot stuff round the heart’ which interests the student of nature as its matter. (a29-b2) (p. 286)

Price thinks, in addition, that what Aristotle means by form and matter is roughly equivalent to what we mean by mental and physical. Hence, he concludes that Aristotle has a dual-aspect theory of perception (and emotion):

His account of perception, as of emotion, is dual-aspect: mental states are realized in physical states to which they give point and function. Perception is at once a causal relation between subject and object, and an awareness by subject of object. (p. 308)

The formal or mental aspect of perception is the goal or function of the perceptual act, which is realized in matter or a physical state.

According to Price, interpretations that ignore either the mental or the physical aspect of perception ought to be rejected. Those who ignore the mental side of perception include interpretations that retool Aristotle to fit a contemporary materialist or functionalist model of mind. For the functionalist or materialist, psychic activities, like perception, are caused by material or physical causes, and material or physical causes are sufficient for the occurrence of the psychic event. Price argues in detail, and convincingly, against one influential interpretation of the physical side of perception; Sorabji’s account of the physical process of perception in which the eye-jelly becomes colored red when red is perceived.

The alternative mistaken approach is exemplified by Myles Burnyeat, who denies that any physical change is necessary for perception to occur. While Burnyeat acknowledges that there are
necessary material conditions for perception (e.g., transparent eye-jelly and medium) he denies both: (a) that there are material conditions sufficient for an act of perception and (b) that a physical change in the organ is necessary in order for perception to occur. Hence, Burnyeat errs in neglecting the physical aspect of perception.

Price agrees with Burnyeat that there are no material conditions sufficient for perception. This is the mistake made by functionalist or materialist interpretations of Aristotle, who neglect the formal aspect of Aristotle's theory. But he also disagrees with Burnyeat's second claim, that there is no physical change in the organ necessary for perception. This claim ignores the physical side of perception, and so cannot be faithful to Aristotle's dual-aspect theory.

Most of Price's fascinating paper is devoted to a description of the physical aspect of perception, namely the relation between subject and object, and the resulting physical state of the organ in which the perceptual state is realized. Price proposes an alternative to Sorabji's account of the physical side of perception. According to Sorabji, when we see red, we do so because our eye-jelly becomes red. This is the physical change in the organ necessary for that act of perception. In place of this account, Price suggests the following:

Visual experience will then require the presence in medium and sense-organ of an analogue of our light-waves, changes set off by visible colours in a transparent medium that cause vision without being more than quasi-visible themselves; they will constitute part of the material aspect of seeing. (p. 290)

And, later in the paper, Price adds the idea that the changes that the eye admits transmit the color of a surface by preserving the ratio of black to white on its surface. The ratio of black to white conveyed in the changes to the eye is the physical side of what Aristotle means by 'perceptible form' (An. II 12, 424a17-24).

How do Price and Burnyeat differ? As I understand Price's position, they differ with regard to whether or not there is a change in the physical organ necessary for perception. Burnyeat holds that there is no change or alteration beyond the fact that the color is visible in the medium, whereas Price holds that there is a change in the eye because it admits the ratios of the colors in the surface of the object. But is this a physical change? On this point, Price is less clear.

This may, in a sense be 'a physics of form alone, without material process' . . . it is still a physics, and not only (or even primarily) a psychology. (293)