I. Perception, Mind, and Philosophy of Mind

Recent scholarship on Aristotle’s philosophy of mind has been guided, to a significant extent, by the issue of whether Aristotle’s theory of cognition (advanced some 2,300 years ago) is akin to theories that have now gained favor within contemporary philosophy of mind. In keeping with this trend, scholars have asked whether Aristotle denies that mental states can be reduced to physical states; scholars have asked whether, for Aristotle, token mental states supervene upon token physical states; and they have asked whether, on his view, mental states are in principle realizable upon a variety of material bases. More often than not, scholarly judgment has sided with the view that Aristotle’s theory of cognition is substantially like one or another of our contemporary theories. In this respect, Aristotle has been embraced as one of our own. It has been argued that Aristotle is an anti-reductive materialist; it has been argued that, for Aristotle, mental properties supervene on physical properties; and it has been argued that, on his view, mental states are multiply realizable.¹ (Aristotle is, perhaps, the first functionalist.) It is now somewhat commonplace to view Aristotle’s theory of cognition as a theory of a decidedly contemporary sort and the occasional criticism of this view is quickly met, from all quarters, with a barrage of counter-attacks.

In connection with the trend in modern scholarship on Aristotle’s philosophy of mind it is noteworthy that, until most recently, scholars have focused not on Aristotle’s theory of intellection, but on his theory of perception (together with his general theory of hylomorphism).² On the face of it, this seems rather peculiar. One might ask, why should Aristotle’s account of mind (νοῦς) be swept off to the side within the debate over Aristotle’s philosophy of mind? But those familiar with Aristotle’s writings already know the cause. Aristotle treats perception as a cognitive capacity that is dependent upon the functioning of

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¹ For a concise overview of the debate, see Shields 1993, esp.160-164.
² Burnyeat is critical of the trend in modern scholarship. He argues that we should junk Aristotle’s philosophy of mind. But, even Burnyeat’s arguments turn almost entirely on an analysis of Aristotle’s theory of perception. He offers no substantive analysis of Aristotle’s account of intellect (see Burnyeat 1992). I offer a critical assessment of Burnyeat’s arguments in my 1996.
specialized bodily organs. These organs (the eyes, the ears, the nose, and the like) are structured in a way that allows the perceiver to take on the form of the perceptible object without its matter (An. II.12, 424a17-25). This taking on of form, as most scholars agree, involves a physiological change within the organ and this change determines the content of our perceptual awareness (at least it does so when it comes to our awareness of the primary objects of each sense). However, Aristotle’s account of intellect does not seem to follow the same line as does his account of perception. His remarks concerning intellect suggest that he understands it to be an immaterial faculty or, at the least, he understands it to be a faculty that depends on an immaterial and transcendent component. Passages from a number of Aristotle’s writings suggest this view, but it is De Anima III.4 & 5 that provide us with the clearest evidence. In De Anima III.4 Aristotle claims that the intellect has no organ (429a26-27) and he claims that, in contrast to perception, intellect is “separable [from the body]” (429b5). So, this chapter clearly suggests that, for Aristotle, intellect is an immaterial faculty. Further, in De Anima III.5 Aristotle introduces νοῦς ποιητικός (active intellect) together with νοῦς παθητικός (passive intellect). Within the tradition of commentary on the De Anima these intellects have been taken to be the chief causal mechanisms of human thought. Νοῦς ποιητικός has been considered to be the efficient cause of thought and νοῦς παθητικός its material cause. While it is arguable that νοῦς παθητικός is somehow dependent upon bodily processes and, so, is not ontologically independent from the body, Aristotle’s description of νοῦς ποιητικός leaves little room for doubt that he thinks this νοῦς transcends the body. For, Aristotle not only claims that this νοῦς is “separable” (430a17), he adds that it “alone [is] immortal and eternal” (430a23). Further, he claims that, while νοῦς παθητικός is perishable, νοῦς ποιητικός is unaffected (430a24-25). This suggests that νοῦς ποιητικός exists independently both prior to and subsequent to this life. Together these two chapters (An. III.4 and 5) suggest that, for Aristotle, intellect is (in some manner) an immaterial faculty. Consequently, they provide the basis for the orthodox view of Aristotle’s account of intellect. According to this view, Aristotle’s treatment of intellect includes a thesis of robust dualism. Thus, his account is taken to be incompatible with contemporary theories of cognition. This explains why Aristotle’s account of mind has been swept off to the side within the debate over Aristotle’s philosophy of mind.

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3 This view depends on the notion νοῦς παθητικός is the same as Aristotle’s ‘possible’ or ‘material’ intellect. Some commentators, Philoponus for one, hold that νοῦς παθητικός is not the same as “material” intellect. For an overview of the tradition from Theophrastus to the late nineteenth century see F. Brentano 1992. What I take to be the predominant view within the tradition is also found in Hamlyn 1993 (/1968), 140 and Robinson 1983, 143-144.