Introduction

The latter half of the second book of *de Anima* is devoted to an examination of perception. Aristotle considers sensation in general in II.5, the objects of sense in II.6, each of the five special senses in II.7-11, and returns to some general observations in II.12. The latter part of III.1 turns to the common sense, as contrasted with the special senses. Linking the investigation of the special senses with that of the common sense is a passage which presents some exegetical difficulties. This bridging section, 424b22 to 425a14, resists efforts to discover a valid and coherent argument, although one is tempted to believe it to be obvious what Aristotle is arguing for, even if it is obscure exactly what the argument is. I believe it is possible, however, that the traditional commentaries have mistaken both the construction and the intent of the passage. Not only is the argument as traditionally conceived formally inadequate, it is entirely non-Aristotelean in tone and outlook. To avoid these difficulties, I shall propose a reinterpretation which, if not itself entirely unproblematic, at least suggests a new approach to understanding the passage. But first a look at the traditional reading is in order.

The Traditional Interpretation

We make take as a clinical example the translation of J.A. Smith. The details of this rendering are not of immediate interest, but rather the vision of the general structure and conclusion of the argument. Smith translates as follows:

That there is no sixth sense in addition to the five enumerated – sight, hearing, smell, taste, touch – may be established by the following considerations:

If we actually have sensation of everything of which touch can give us sensation

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(for all the qualities of the tangible *qua* tangible are perceived by us through touch); and if absence of a sense necessarily involves absence of a sense-organ; and if (1) all objects that we perceive by immediate contact with them are perceptible by touch, which sense we actually possess, and (2) all objects that we perceive through media, i.e. without immediate contact, are perceptible by or through the simple elements, e.g. air and water (and this is so arranged that (a) if more than one kind of sensible object is perceivable through a single medium, the possessor of a sense-organ homogeneous with that medium has the power of perceiving both kinds of objects; for example, if the sense-organ is made of air, and air is the medium for both sound and for colour; and that (b) if more than one medium can transmit the same kind of sensible objects, as e.g. water as well as air can transmit colour, both being transparent, then the possessor of either alone will be able to perceive the kind of objects transmittable through both); and if of the simple elements two only, air and water, go to form sense-organs (for the pupil is made of water, the organ of hearing is made of air, and the organ of smell of one or the other of these two, while fire is found either in none or in all – warmth being an essential condition of all sensibility – and earth either in none or, if anywhere, specially mingled with the components of the organ of touch; wherefore it would remain that there can be no sense-organ formed of anything except water and air); and if these sense-organs are possessed by those animals that are not imperfect or mutilated (for even the mole is observed to have eyes beneath its skin); so that, if there is no fifth element and no property other than those which belong to the four elements of our world, no sense can be wanting to such animals.

Further, there cannot be any special sense-organ for the common sensibles either . . .

Without agonizing over the details of the passage, one can characterize this reading both with respect to its form and its content. In form, the section is presented as one labyrinthine positive argument, a huge conditional with several clauses in the protasis. In content, the passage is taken as an attempt to establish that there could not possibly be more than the five senses already surveyed the book II. I shall call a traditional interpretation any interpretation which adopts these views of the argument’s form and content. Commentators with traditional interpretations include Alexander, Simplicius, Philoponus, Aquinas, Hicks, Ross, Hamlyn, Rodier, Bonitz, and Modrak.

The point supposedly established is very strong, asserting not just that humans (and other animals) have just five senses but that, for reasons having to do with the limited number of elements, one can be assured that no more senses are even possible. Some severe constraints on possible senses must be invoked to defend this thesis. Several features of the argument are easily abstracted from Smith’s translation. First, there is a fundamental distinction between those senses which operate by direct contact and those which instead employ a medium. Traditional interpreta-