Proper Sensibles and Καθ’ Αύτά Causes

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1. In DA II.6, Aristotle distinguishes three types of perceptible object:

The term 'object of perception' is applied to three kinds of thing, of which two, we say, are perceived καθ’ αύτά, and one is perceived accidentally (καθ’ αύτά συμβεβηκ-κός). Of the first two, one is proper (ὅθεν) to a single sense and the other is common to all the senses.

(418a8-11)

Following this, we can call the three types of perceptible objects 'proper', 'common' and 'accidental' sensibles. Distinguishing between the objects of perception in this way is important for Aristotle's account of the senses because he seeks to define the individual senses by reference to their objects, and by distinguishing between perceptible objects as he does he is able to isolate one class of perceptible object, the proper sensibles, which can be appealed to in the definitions of the senses. It is these which are 'strictly (χωρίως) perceptible' and to which 'the essence (οὐσία) of each sense is naturally relative' (418a24-25). Any elucidation of what Aristotle has to say about the relation between the senses and their objects will need to determine why the proper and common sensibles are both perceptible καθ’ αύτά, whilst the accidental sensibles are not, and why the proper sensibles, and not the common or accidental sensibles, are perceptible χωρίως.

That Aristotle defines the senses by reference to their proper objects is generally agreed by his commentators. Thus, David Hamlyn, in his commentary on the De Anima, writes that

Aristotle means by this [that the proper and common objects are perceived καθ’ αύτά] that the relation between the sense and its object is an essential one... That is to say that if we use the sense we must perceive the kind of object in question, since the sense is defined by reference to the kind of object.¹

Similarly, Richard Sorabji claims that when Aristotle says that 'the sensible qualities are related to the senses as καθ’ αύτά, he is saying, in other


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words, that 'one is defined by reference to the other'. Both Sorabji and Hamlyn thus accept that Aristotle defines the senses by reference to their objects and seem to take the essential relation between a sense and its objects to be a conceptually or logically necessary one. That Aristotle should define the senses by reference to their objects is indeed what we should expect given his general remarks in DA II.4 about the study of the capacities of the ψυχή. Before one can determine the nature of a particular capacity, he says, one must first specify its activity, since 'activities and actions are prior to capacities in respect of the definition' (415a18-20). This seems obvious enough: one will only be able to say what it is to possess the capacity to Φ if one has first said what it is to Φ. Aristotle’s next move is less obvious, however:

If this is so, and one should think about their corresponding objects (τὰ δὲντά· ἑκτίπνεια) before these, then for the same reason one should first define these, e.g. food, and the object of perception and the object of thought. (415a20-22)

To understand what, for instance, the perceptual capacity is, one must know what its characteristic activity, perceiving, is — but to do this, apparently, one must first enquire into its objects. This is said to be for the same reason as that which made it necessary to consider the activity before the capacity — and that was because the activity was prior in definition to its capacity. So, for some reason, Aristotle thinks that the objects of a capacity are definitionally prior to the activity of that capacity, which in its turn is definitionally prior to the capacity itself.

He does not tell us in II.4 why we should take the objects of a psychic capacity to be definitionally prior to the capacity, but it is perhaps possible, from what he says in the course of putting his definitional method into practice in his treatments of the particular capacities, to elicit his motivation for it. I shall argue that, contrary to the views of Hamlyn and Sorabji, the definitional relation between the senses and their proper objects is secured upon the fact that those objects are the καθό  ωθητον agents of perception.

2. Given that the proper sensibles are such things as colours and sounds, it might be tempting to think of them as private, mental items, such as sensa-


3 So, Hamlyn talks of the objects being ‘internal’ to the senses (ibid., p. 105) and Sorabji talks of 'logically necessary truth' (op. cit., p. 81). No doubt a Wittgenstinian would talk about the 'grammar' of our talk about perception.