

Touching, Thinking, Being: The Sense of Touch in Aristotle's *De anima* and Its Implications

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Abstract

Aristotle's treatment of tactility is at odds with the hierarchical order of psyche's faculties. Touching is the commonest and lowest power; it is possessed by all sentient beings; thinking is, on the contrary, the highest faculty that distinguishes human beings. Yet, while Aristotle maintains against some of his predecessors that to think is not to sense, he nevertheless posits a causal link between practical intelligence and tactility and even describes noetic activity as a certain kind of touch.

This essay elucidates Aristotle's analysis of the sense of touch in *De anima* and argues that tactility provides a paradigm for sensitivity in general and in particular for the reflexivity of sensation whereby the senses disclose not only *what* they are sensing but also *that* they are sensing. This feature, it is argued, has epistemological and ontological consequences. The sense of touch testifies to the physical presence of material beings and provides an empirical verification of substance's essential feature, namely, self-reference.

Aristotle's inquiry into the soul encounters a multiplicity of hierarchies. First (a) a hierarchy of the soul and the body: since it is a principle, the soul has ascendancy over the body it rules; then (b) a hierarchy among the *functions* of the soul with nourishment (which includes growing and withering) at the lowest level, followed by locomotion, rest, perception, and finally intellection; then (c) a hierarchy *among ensouled beings* (from plants to animals, to humans, and beyond to the prime mover itself¹); and finally (d) a much more unstable hierarchy *among the senses*: touch and taste (which is a variant of touch), then smelling, hearing, and finally seeing.

The last one is of importance because it grounds the others. Organisms endowed of nothing more than the sense of touch are more restricted in their faculties; thus, nutrition needs only touch and taste, but locomotion demands other sensory channels. According to Aristotle, testacea (invertebrate animals covered with a shell) are capable of feeding but are deprived of locomotion.² Yet, this hierarchy is not as

obvious as one might think. In principle, the faculties of touching and thinking should correspond, respectively, to the lowest and the highest powers sentient beings can possess since, even though intellection depends in some way on sensation and imagination, it constitutes a distinct order and cannot be reduced to them.³ For this reason, one would presume that Aristotle's references to sense perception in his discussion of intellectual acts are merely "metaphorical."⁴

This assumption is unwarranted and the purpose of this essay is to demonstrate that Aristotle's seemingly incongruous rapprochement between touch and intellection harbors a deeper problem. The sense of touch anticipates (or rather incarnates) the determination of being as substance and as actuality as well as the determination of the first cause as a "thought that thinks itself." If it is so, however, the lower degree of sentiency must already inform the highest form of pure actual self-intuition. This reveals a mirroring effect between lowest and highest that upsets the hierarchical order of the soul's faculties.

I The Lower and the Higher

An ensouled being (*empsychon*) constitutes in an exemplary sense *one* being. It is a whole, not a conglomerate of parts and bits of matter. Obviously, an account of the unity of a composite should not be limited to the case of living entities. The question could be raised about a rock made of ores or a ship made of planks. In all these instances something that is *one* is nevertheless not *simple* and in all these instances the source of a composite's unity depends on a principle that is "supreme" or "dominant." Further, since it provides the unity of a multiplicity, the ruling principle cannot itself be a member of what it rules. In the case of living beings, however, this principle is the soul.

One might wonder what makes a unity out of the elements. The elements appear to be more like the materials, whereas that which holds a thing together (whatever it may be), is the foremost ruling feature [*kuriōtaton*]. It is impossible that

something superior rules the soul and this is even more impossible when it comes to the intellect. For it is reasonable that it, by nature, be the preeminent and ruling feature (410b10-14)

Thus, the soul is a governing principle. By supervening over the compound's multiplicity, it "holds the body together" (411b34). Thus, the determination of the soul as "principle of life" must be understood first of all in contradistinction with death, which is dissolution of unity, loss of integrity, and return to the chaos of separation.

The unity of a composite demands a hierarchy. An investigation into the soul is *ipso facto* an investigation into a governing principle whose primary function is to produce unity by enforcing its rule. If it is true that the expression "body politics" applies a biological model to the social order, Aristotle's language of "dominance," "supremacy," "nobility," "excellence," and "rule," applies a political model to the bio/psychological domain.

Yet, the soul itself is not simple but harbors a plurality. Thus, in order to be a unifying principle, the soul must possess an *intrinsic* unity for the manifold of its functions is not a composite of *elements* (*stoicheia*, a term usually reserved for matter) as Empedocles and Heraclitus allegedly proclaimed, but a plurality of *powers* that cannot exist in separation.⁵ In *De anima* II, 2 Aristotle shows that the nutritive, appetitive, sentient, motile, and intellectual powers constitute a hierarchy, since if one of the latest is present in an animal the former ones must also be present, while the converse is not true. Once again, the higher and nobler supersedes the low and the common. Not only is sentiency lower than intellection ("the most divine of phenomena" *Meta.* L 9, 1074b16), but within sentiency, touch seems to constitute the lowest form because it is most directly connected to the primordial need of the body— nutrition, and this is why it is found in all sentient beings.⁶ Consequently, the sense of touch has (or should have) nothing to do with thought, the highest power of the human soul. Thought cannot touch, and touch cannot think.

Yet, there is a divergence in the Aristotelian corpus between some texts that privilege the sense of sight (*Protrepticus*, *Metaphysics* A, 1) and others that appeal to touch.⁷ Commentators have suggested that the praise of the human hand in *De partibus animalium* (687a6-b3) rehabilitates the sense of touch. In *Generation and Corruption* Aristotle himself seems to oscillate between both views, for he explains that the primary contraries of bodies (hot and cold, dry and wet) are properly known by touch, yet maintains that: “sight is preeminent [*proteron*] over touch” (*De Gen. et Corr.* 329b13). Most often, however, touch is presented as the lowest and most ordinary sense. What is more, in the ethical writings, the crudeness of touch takes on an axiological connotation. Sensation, after all, is not simply a matter of knowledge but also of pleasure. Sight, hearing, and smelling allow for a kind of discrimination and enjoyment that is independent from appetites; therefore they are not prone to excessive pleasure (we wouldn’t call intemperate “those who enjoy the smell of apples, roses or incense” *E. N.* 1118a10),⁸ but the lower senses (touch and taste) make us susceptible to wantonness and we regard those who abandon themselves to gustatory or tactile pleasures as depraved. Thus, ethical considerations too should prohibit any attempt to link touching with psyche’s higher functions.

However, something else occurs in *De anima* that challenges, or at least complicates, this account. While touch is still understood as the most basic sense among sentient beings, the highest functions of practical intelligence [*phronēsis*] and even thought [*dianoia*] are presented in chapter 9 of book II as *depending* on tactility. With respect to touch, man excels by far in discrimination over the other animals and “this is *why* [*dio*] man is the most intelligent of all animals” (421a22). Even divine thought is described as a pure contact. “In participating with the intelligible the intellect thinks of itself, for it becomes intelligible by touching [*thigganōn*] and thinking” (*Meta.* 1072b20-1). In other words, not only is the lowest and commonest sense the most perfect in humans (even though humans rank higher than brutes) but it is the cause of human intelligence, and even divine activity is a certain kind of touching. If this is the

case, touch must be at play across all our psychic abilities and not simply lie at its lowest end. This carries epistemological and ontological consequences.

II Paradoxes of Touch

The first feature that sets the sense of touch apart from the other senses is that it is coextensive with sentient life in two important ways. First, touch is the *condition of all sentient life*. As such, it provides the extension of a class of beings (if x is a sentient being then x possesses at least the sense of touch). Touch, argues Aristotle, is possessed by all animals insofar as they have the ability to *sense* food (this is why all animals with touch also have taste). Through this feature alone animals differ from plants, for vegetal nutrition occurs without sensing and therefore without discrimination. “Plants possess the power of nutrition only; other living things possess this and also the power of sensation” (414a31). This difference entails that touch is not reducible to physical contact and, consequently, that the process of sensation is not a specification of mechanics.⁹

The roots of a plant are in contact with the nutrients of the soil just as a book is in contact with the table on which it rests; this simply means that there is no third body between their extremities. Yet, neither the book nor the plant *touches* what they are in contact with. A plant is capable of nourishing itself, but it does so mechanically, without desiring food, for where there is no perception there is no desire. In this case, a vital *process* occurs without the plant originating an *act*. With tactility, however, a whole array of powers enters the stage: “if they have the faculty for sensation then they also have appetite, for appetite consists of desire, inclination, and aspiration [*boulēsis*], and all animals have at least one sense: touch” (414b3-5). With tactility, life is open to an outside and thus to pleasure and pain. As soon as an animal is capable of touching, it is exposed to a world and responds to it. Furthermore, touch is “basic” in the sense of *vital*. Touch is coextensive with animal life; it emerges and

vanishes with it. An animal endowed with other sense organs can remain alive even if it loses hearing, taste, smell, or sight, but the loss of tactility is its death.

A specific feature of touch is that it is not localized but affects the whole body. Seeing occurs through the eyes, hearing, through the ears, smelling through the nostrils, tasting through the throat and the palate; in these instances the head is the center of sensation; touching, however, does not reside in any specific part of the body. Because it has no specific location but affects the body as a whole, touch is the sense of embodiment par excellence. Although in most instances touching is localized (we feel a stroke on the back or the wind on the face), this simply confirms the fact that touching involves the whole body since it may occur anywhere. Thus, the sense of touch occurs at the threshold of the distinction between interior and exterior. With touch, an organism that can feel itself while sensing what is other than itself; it is on this basis that other senses can distinguish the object and the subject. All our senses have learned to tell the difference between what occurs inside and whatever occurs outside, seeing and what is seen, hearing and what is heard, etc.¹⁰

That touch is not identical with a mere contact between two bodies (a plant is in contact with the soil but an animal touches it) is puzzling since we commonly appeal to distance and proximity to order the senses: sight, smell and hearing occur at a distance, while touch and taste (which Aristotle treats as a species of touch) requires contiguity.¹¹ It is significant that in the above-mentioned list taste is brought together with touch not by virtue of the previous determination of touch as the sense of food but by virtue of the fact that taste occurs through what appears to be a direct contact with the object: “The object of taste is a sort of tangible [*hapton ti*]; it is because of this that it cannot be sensed through some other kind of body, just like touch” (422a10). If, in these instances, sensation *seems* to occur without medium, then direct contact should be required. Yet, the general schema of sensation shows that a sensory experience depends on three (not two) terms, namely: a sensible object, a sense organ, and a medium. Do we experience in these instances a “pure,” unmediated sensation?¹²

No doubt, in order to touch, some contact must occur. Yet, it does not follow that this contact is unmediated. The contrast between distance sensations (as in seeing, smelling, and hearing) and those that require proximity (touching and tasting) does not correspond to the distinction between mediation and immediacy.¹³ Aristotle declares that touch and taste do not occur “through *some other kind* of body” that is to say, it does not occur in the way sight occurs through a diaphanous body between the eye and the visible object. But the absence of *another* body is not identical with the absence of a *medium*. Even in the experience of intimate closeness mediation remains.

Is then the perception of all things similar, or is it different for different senses, for it is now commonly believed that taste and touch occur by contact while the other senses act at a distance? But it is not so. We sense both hard and soft objects through something else just as we do with objects that are audible, visible or can be smelt; but the latter act from a distance while the former act when they are near to us and this is why we fail to notice it. Although we sense everything through a medium, this escapes our notice in the case of touch and taste (423b4-9)

The consideration of distance and proximity leads us to believe that distance-sensations are mediated and contact-sensation unmediated. But this is because, in the second case, we fail to notice the medium. Like a fish who doesn't know that the things it encounters are wet, we do not notice what is too close to us (423a30). Despite the suggestion of intimacy it conveys, tactility retains its own distance.¹⁴ If it is to constitute a sensory experience touch must occur through *something else* and is therefore no exception to the tripartite analysis of sensation.

This is why the question of the location of touch's proper organ depends on an argument concerning the medium. Chapter 11 of *De anima* II is governed by an alternative: either the organ of touch is flesh as a whole, or the organ is hidden farther inward and flesh constitutes its medium. The argument in support of the second hypothesis consists in demonstrating that the apparent immediacy of touch is in fact compatible with the existence of a medium.

Is the sense organ internal, or, if this is not the case, does the flesh feel directly? That sensation occurs at the moment of contact is *not* a clear indication. For even if, as it is, one were to wrap a membrane around the flesh, as soon as it is touched, the sensation would still occur instantly; yet it is clear that the sense organ is not in the membrane (423a1-5)

Instantaneity is no proof of immediacy. Just as we do not see the air through which we see the visible, we do not feel the flesh through which we sense the tangible. In the first instance, however, the medium is a body separate from us while our flesh is not *another* body. “The body itself must be grown upon it [i.e., upon the organ of sense – *aisthēterion, sensorium*] as a medium of that which has the power of touch and that through which a multitude of sensations occurs” (423a16). This “growing upon” or “growing together” (*prospephukos*) stresses the intimate connection of organ and medium. Yet, despite this proximity, our flesh retains a certain otherness without which sensation would not be possible. Let us imagine Aristotle’s “membrane” as a wet suit of the kind divers wear. In this case the diver would instantaneously perceive a blow. Yet, it would be absurd to say that the wet suit *feels* the blow. In a similar manner our flesh retains some alterity. It is ‘ours’ by virtue of our embodiment; yet, it is not quite “us” by reason of its mediumistic character.

If physical contact occurs between contiguous *surfaces*, the experience of touch reveals the fact that living bodies possess *depth*. Flesh is a medium, but it is a medium that animals carry with them and the experience of touch occurs from within the depth of their own flesh.¹⁵ The analogy with a membrane is further developed with the example of a shield. The shield is to the warrior what the flesh is to the organ of touch, namely, a sort of layer that protects the source of life (the vital heat).¹⁶ When we perceive visible objects the medium (the illuminated transparent) acts on our sense organ (eye); when we touch, however, it is not our flesh that acts on us; rather, we perceive “at the same time as the medium is acted upon, like a man who is hit through his shield; for it is not the stricken shield that struck him, but both he and the shield were struck simultaneously together” (423b15-16).

It is essential to clarify Aristotle's distinction between perceiving "by a medium" and perceiving "at the same time as the medium." Yet, despite the fact that the shield analogy is often quoted, it remains obscure. If a soldier hits another one in such a way that the sword, while landing on the shield, hurts his enemy, couldn't we say that the shield did play an instrumental role? Isn't the shield a secondary intermediate cause of the warrior's wound? This, I suppose, would be a legitimate account. But Aristotle's point is not to deny the *instrumental* function of the shield. If it were so, the claim according to which all sensations entail mediation would be untenable. Rather, Aristotle stresses that "both he and the shield were struck together." It is this concomitance that constitutes the specific character of touch. If an object touches me, I experience not only the object but also at once and together my flesh being touched by the object. It is not that my flesh does not play a role (by definition, if it is a *medium* it has an instrumental function) but it does not *merely* play an instrumental role. "Thus, is it clear that that which is perceptive of what is touched is within" (423b23).¹⁷ Aristotle does not entrap the experience of touch in a subjectivist account according to which I can only feel my own flesh. On the contrary, since a medium is always involved in sensation and since even touch is no exception, auto-affection itself is mediated.¹⁸ Aristotle's account of sensation is neither subjectivist nor physicalist and mechanistic. The key expression is "*all' ham' amphō*" (literally: 'but both.'): I sense both the object *and* (simultaneously) my flesh affected by the object. The experience is simultaneously active and passive: touching I am touched. All sensory media (including the flesh) articulate the irreducible exteriority of the sensible to the sensing and the heterogeneity between organ and medium.¹⁹ This, it turns out, has epistemological and metaphysical implications but first, we must ask why Aristotle claims that intelligence and thought are causally linked to the sense of touch.

III Touching and Thinking

At 427a26 Aristotle states that for the ancient philosophers thinking (*to noein*) was similar to sensing. While Aristotle rejects such an identification, his rebuttal is not meant as an outright dismissal. The ancients erred not in linking thinking and sensing but in drawing from this analogy the conclusion that thinking must be some corporeal process. Even though the inference is false, nowhere does Aristotle suggest that the analogy between thinking and sensing is utterly unfounded. Rather, the ancients observed something quite important when they noticed that thought and touch share the power of discriminating and knowing (427a21). What Aristotle rejects is a term-to-term identification: “It is evident that sensing and understanding [*phronein*] are not the same, for all animals have a share in the former but only a few in the latter” (427b7). By contrast with *noein* (mentioned immediately after), *phronein* deals with the changing circumstances of our surroundings, the aim is to adapt to them or to transform them. In either case, it is about responding resourcefully to adversity. Now, Aristotle clearly states that *phronēsis* is not *identical* to sensing; yet its emergence depends not only on sensibility in general, but more specifically on the sense of touch.

J.L. Chrétien reconstructs a plausible argument in these terms: “If touch discriminates between what is useful and what is noxious, if it is wholly ordered to the preservation of life and cannot be separated from it, then the being whose touch is most refined and most discriminating will, for this reason, be most able to preserve his life: such a being will be most secure therefore and least imperiled, since most able to guard against danger— or so it would seem.”²⁰ The argument would depend on a teleological assumption: beside registering tangible qualities, touch exists *for the sake of* preserving our being by setting apart the noxious from the auspicious.²¹ This is why the analysis of the discriminating function of touch proceeds through a discussion of the means which is the cornerstone of practical intelligence. We do not sense something that is as hard or as soft, as hot or as cold as our own flesh, but only those sensations that exceed our flesh for our tactility is a kind of mean between contraries.

If, then, not all animals exhibit intelligence, the human privilege is not due to our ability to overcome sensation but rather, paradoxically, to our excessive sensitivity.

Because it is not a faculty of a single contrary pair but a power to discriminate between hot and cold, rough and smooth, soft and hard, and so forth, touch exposes our body to a multiplicity of sensations. From this Aristotle draws the link between touch and intelligence:

For man, the sense which is most discriminating is that of touch. With respect to the other senses, man is far inferior to the other animals; but with respect to the sense of touch he excels by far in discrimination over the other animals. This is why man is the most intelligent [*phronimōtaton*] of animals. A sign of this is the fact that, even within the human race, it is by virtue of this sense organ and of no other that some are well-gifted or poorly gifted by nature; for those with hard flesh [*sklērosarkoi*] are poorly gifted for thought [*dianoian*] by nature, while those with soft flesh are well gifted (421a20-26)

We have then to revisit psyche's hierarchical order. First, Aristotle affirms human superiority by linking it to the extreme development in us of the most *common* and *basic* trait we share with all animals. If the human race occupies a higher standing among sentient beings it is because of the development in us of the most primitive faculty. Second, intelligence is proportioned to the degree of tactile sensibility in such a way that it is our vulnerability that accounts for our alleged superiority. The sharpest the power of discrimination, the greatest the ability to protect oneself; but this *equally* means that one is more open to danger. In other words, resourcefulness presupposes distress. Finally, we should note that while the argument is *initially* about practical intelligence, it eventually extends to dianoetic thinking, a faculty which, at 414b18, is associated with *nous* and sharply distinguished from sensation.²² But since Aristotle resists identifying thinking with sensing what does he mean here? To resolve this difficulty the 6th century Christian commentator John Philoponus suggested a plausible solution: the sensitivity of our flesh is a cause of intelligence in the sense of a "material cause" only, not in the sense of an efficient one.²³ Among contemporaries,

Giancarlo Movia concurs: “the softness of the [human] flesh represents the primary *natural* condition of intelligence (which can be expressed, as Philoponus observed, in terms of *material* causality).”²⁴

As far as Aristotle is concerned, the problem with sensation is not what alarms modern thinkers: namely, the fact that sensation can be *deceptive*. The problem is rather that sensation can be *excessive*. An unmediated sensation would be the destruction of sensation. We need light in order to see, but too much light can blind us, an extremely loud sound can deafen us, an overpowering smell or taste can paralyze our ability to smell or taste. Sentient beings are exposed beings and the claim according to which “man’s flesh is the softest of all” (*De partibus*, 660a11) is not a praise of our sophisticated sensuality or aesthetic disposition, but rather stresses that man is the least protected, the most vulnerable of animals.²⁵ Aristotle’s insistence on the softness of human flesh must be understood in relation to his previous discussion of the medium. Among the different sensory media, what sets flesh apart is not only that it is not a foreign body like air or water, but that it operates like a protective stratum. The senses are not simply the gateways through which the external world enters into the mind. They also are the gatekeepers that select and limit the intake from the outer world. Aristotle mentions a few times that if the sense organ is directly exposed to the sensible, then either sensation does not occur or the sense organ is destroyed. The analogy between the flesh and a shield suggests that the process of sensation demands that we be protected from sensory overload. What happens then when the medium turns out to be the delicate human flesh? What happens with a harsh blow? In such a case we do not simply risk losing one of our senses, we risk losing our life. This is why the sense of touch is properly *vital*. On the one hand, it is the primary way a sentient being is open to the world; on the other, the world can destroy it by affecting it with an intensity that overwhelms its capacity.

But Aristotle goes further and carries the consequence of the argument beyond practical intelligence to include noetic activity. On the ground of the first page of the

Metaphysics one could object that when it comes to speculative thinking we should abandon the reference to tactility and appeal to the sense of *sight* whose superiority is explicitly justified by its alleged proximity to the intellect. The Western philosophical tradition has relentlessly described the intellect as the mind's eye; it has construed the intelligible as the visible, and interpreted the attainment of wisdom as enlightenment. The issue is not a matter of replacing a paradigm by another but to trace the genealogy of the privilege of sight back to what, on Aristotle's account, sight itself presupposes. Our multi-sensory openness to the world is not a mere juxtaposition of powers; rather, all our senses are expressions of a primordial power of sensing and "'sensible' is equivalent to 'tangible'" (*De gen et corr*, 329b7). As we saw, touching is the primitive power of discriminating and knowing for, while touch may exist without other senses, other senses cannot endure if touch is destroyed.

As for thought, even though thinking and sensing are distinct, the noema – the object of thought – is also grasped through a medium.

Images [*phantasmata*] are to the thinking soul [*dianoētikē psuchē*] like sense impressions. When it affirms or denies them as good or bad it pursues or avoids them. For this reason the soul never thinks without images. It is like the air which acts on the eye in a certain way while the eye acts on something else, and similarly in the case of hearing (431a15-19).

Images play an intermediary yet necessary function in the process of thinking. Aristotle's first justification is that the intellect behaves like sensation: it discriminates between its images; it pursues some and avoids others. Thereby, the thinking soul carries on at an intellectual level the primordial thrust of sentient life which is to tell apart the noxious from the useful. Yet (and this constitutes Aristotle's second justification), just as in the process of sensation we are not focusing on the medium but on the sensible object, what thought is properly concerned with, what it seeks, is *not* an image. In other words, to the sensory tri-partition of the sense organ, the sensible object, and the medium corresponds the tri-partition of thought, noema, and

phantasmata. And because of its invisible proximity, in both cases the medium is what we often fail to notice. Thought is oriented toward a form which is not itself an image yet, is grasped *through* imagination which constitutes the intermediary.

But what do we learn from touching? Tactility gives us *too much* to sense, it opens up to too many impressions: it testifies not only to the hard and the soft, but also the hot and the cold, the dry and the humid, the rough and the smooth, and many other data (e.g., texture and shape). For this reason one could wonder whether it is really *one* sense and not many as Aristotle mentions (421b20). One could think that this multiplicity indicates that tactility is more primitive than the other more refined and specialized senses. Yet, insofar as dry and humid, hot and cold constitute the four fundamental properties of matter, this plurality eventually converges toward unity in the determination of touch as the sense of body *qua* body.

Since we are looking for the principles of the sensible body and since '*sensible*' is equivalent to '*tangible*' and tangible is that which is perceived by touch, it is clear that not all contraries constitute the forms and principles of bodies, but only those that occur by touch. It is indeed in accordance with a contrariety that the primary bodies are differentiated and this is a contrariety according to touch (*De gen et corr*, 329b7-10).²⁶

Whether hot or cold, dry or humid, rough or smooth, touch testifies to physical presence. This is why when discussing the "intangible," Aristotle mentions that which is *barely* tangible (like air or a microscopic thing) and that which is *excessively* tangible and threatens to destroy the sense organ. The "intangible" designates the extreme contraries *within* the range of the tangible, ruling out the possibility that something could be material *and* intangible; whatever is material is in principle tangible. Alexander of Aphrodisias adds the following supporting argument:

Moreover, if whiteness is a natural body, and every natural body is tangible, then whiteness [will be] tangible. But it is not tangible. So it is not a body. For if whiteness were tangible, touch would be affected by it. But it is not affected. So [whiteness] is not tangible (*Supplement to "On the Soul," (Mantissa)*, 122, 25-28).²⁷

Colors or sounds are merely accidental properties of bodies. In that sense, as far as the material world is concerned, touch is the best guarantor of what is. Even if the particular qualities of an object (roughness, smoothness, heat, cold, and so forth) were misperceived, we would still feel *that it is*. The testimony of touch possesses an apparent privilege of immediacy.²⁸ Of course, we must qualify this claim for two reasons: first, as we saw earlier, no sensation, not even touch, is truly immediate; should the tangible object enter into immediate contact with the organ of touch *without the mediation of flesh* we would not sense anymore. Second, just as thinking is a process whereby thought becomes identical with its object, sensation is the process whereby sensibility changes from being unlike the sensed quality to being like it. But the necessary intercession of a medium guarantees that what becomes *like* the sensible quality never simply becomes *identical* to it. For this reason, the so-called “literalist” interpretation which suggests that the sense organ literally acquires the sensible properties of the sensed object misses the point that perception is not so much a transformation of the sense organ than a change in becoming aware of it. The existence of a medium entails that there is always an interval between sensing and being sensed for a medium, by definition, simultaneously relates and distinguishes.²⁹ If it were not the case, there wouldn’t be any difference between touch and contact and instead of *feeling* the sensible we would simply be causally altered by it.³⁰

Yet, even when we take into account the necessity of distance in all sensory experiences, Aristotle, I believe, would remain committed to the claim that touch primarily gives access to “bodies *qua* bodies,” that we do experience the presence, the substantiality of material substances. The color, sound, smell, and taste of something refer back, of course, to the material substance to which they belong; but they do so by indicating it, by presupposing it; they do not express its materiality. Touch, by contrast, is the sense of materiality *par excellence*; and this can occur only if the experience of presence is an experience of co-presence.

IV Metaphysical Implications

Despite its primitiveness, the sense of touch cannot be supplanted by the other, allegedly more refined, senses for two fundamental reasons: first, Aristotle reaffirms in chapter 13 of *De anima* III that “without the sense of touch it [the animal] would be unable to have any other sense” (435a14). Hence, touch may be the most archaic of our senses, but it is so in the sense of constituting a *ground* to our more complex sensory apparatus. Second, Aristotle claims that “the other sense organs too perceive by touch” (435a19). Thus, they depart from touch in the sense that they constitute various forms of specification and specialization that carry on the same fundamental function by other means.³¹ Furthermore, we must recall that sensation is never *exclusively* concerned with sensible object, but that it also feels its own power. In addition to sensing the heat of the sun or the fragrance of incense, sensation also includes the sense of sensing; it feels that something is felt. We do not simply see the visible; we also sense *seeing*. Without this doubling at the heart of sensory experience, we wouldn’t know that we are seeing. The power to feel both the *absence* of vision (in the dark, I sense that I do not see) and seeing itself (in seeing, I sense that I see) is one and the same power. If it were not so, if the senses were not also sensing themselves, then some other sense would be needed to account for this awareness and we would multiply our senses *ad infinitum*.³² Thus, each sense has both a proper function (e.g., hearing’s proper function is to perceive sounds) and a common one that attends to it. The common sense (also called “the dominant sense” in *De somno et vigilia*, 455a21) accompanies all aspects of sensation; it is not limited to the apprehension of common sensible qualities but contributes to what Heller-Roazen calls “a single common dimension of sensation.”³³ The duality at the core of sensation is made manifest by the fact that even when the sense organ is not actually exercising its proper function (as when we keep our eyes shut) something must still remain whereby we perceive that we do *not* perceive. In a sense, darkness is visible: we perceive the presence of the perceptual faculty even though it is not exercised in second actuality, “for even when we are not seeing, we distinguish darkness from light by means of sight, though not in

the way we distinguish colors” (425b21-23). The common sense not only allows us to perceive that we see when we see but also that we *can* see (potentially) when we actually do not.

It is then not only by virtue of their receptivity but also by virtue of their shared participation to the common sense that all senses are connected with the sense of touch. This duality of feeling in a unique way a sensible object (“special function”) and of sensing one’s very feeling (“common faculty”) is most manifest in tactile sensations where to touch the object is equally to be touched by it. The parallel between common sense and touch is confirmed in *De somno*:

There is one sense faculty and one principal sense organ, but the mode of its sensitivity varies with each class of sensible objects (e.g., sounds or colors); and this belongs eminently [*malisth’ huparchei*] to touch for this is separable from the other sense organs but the others are inseparable from it (*De somno*, 455a20-25).

At this junction, one could be inclined to simply identify touch and common sense by appealing to the subsequent Stoic definition of common sense as an “inner touch.” Some commentators have followed this path. Aëtius talks of the common sense as an inner touch by means of which we perceive ourselves (*Placita*, 4. 8. 7); this inner touch would parallel our external senses. Michael of Ephesus in his commentary on *De anima* declares that “if one must tell the truth, touch and the common sense are one.”³⁴ Although Aristotle’s text does not assert such a simple identification (Aristotle talks in a cursory manner of the dominant sense as “belonging eminently” to touch), it is clear that touch is not only a sense that anticipates all senses but that it exhibits to a greater extent the duality of a proper and common function by pointing simultaneously to the object of sensation and to the sensing of the object.³⁵

This has important consequences for an ontology of material substances in particular and for ontology in general. It has been argued that the sense-organs alone cannot

capture the substantiality of substances (their essence or quiddity) because, strictly speaking, sensation can only discern sensible qualities (e.g., hot, black, or bitter). Only the intellect (presumably in cooperation with sensation) can assert *what* possesses these qualities.³⁶ But it is so if we only consider the *proper* sensible qualities and the isolated sensory data we come upon are incapable by themselves of referring to a substantial being (hot, black, and bitter are not identical to “being-coffee”). However, these proper sensible qualities do not exhaust what occur in sense perception. Aristotle’s use of the term “*aisthetikon*” is not limited to the proper sensibles; in a broader sense *aisthetikon* includes common sense and allows for the recognition of particulars, which is to say, of primary substances. “Actual sensation is of particulars” (417b14). The detection of substances doesn’t need an act of the intellect. As Joseph Magee notices, “non-human animals have no share of *nous*, but they are nevertheless able to sense particular sensible substances as substances.”³⁷ Sensibility *knows* its object; it does not passively receive sense data, it discerns. Furthermore, sensibility allows for a form of self-knowing which is a matter of *self-sensing*, of feeling one’s own life since all affections and sensations are *ipso facto* auto-affections. Through this auto-affection life knows itself; and although, by virtue of the *sensus communis*, this is true of any sensory experience, this is eminently demonstrated by the sense of touch, as the experience of wake and sleep shows: “they [waking and sleep] are attributes of all animals, for touch alone is common to all animals” (*De somno*, 455a26).

A further consequence is that, despite the linguistic relation between *parousia* and *ousia*, *presence* alone is not the determining feature of substantial beings. Colors and sounds are no less present; yet, they are not substantial but indicators of substances. They are properties *of* something, but insofar as they belong *to* a substance, their identity is derivative since it depends on their bearer (this yellow is the yellow *of* a lemon, this sound is the sound *of* a flute, etc). It is so because non-substantial categories are incapable of having separate being. Substance, on the contrary, halts the reference to a further term. “The *ousia* of each thing is what each is on its own since it

does not belong to anything else” (*Meta.* 1038b10). If substance enjoys a privilege in the search for the primary sense of being, it is because substance indicates a being that is “in itself” in such a way that it has an essence and is endowed of an identity. To claim that something has substantial being is to claim that it refers to nothing other than itself. Because it is its own referent (it is an ‘itself’), substance puts a stop to any further reference.

‘Being and ‘substance’ are not abstract concepts. Before any theoretical ontology, beings must be encountered and all conceptual ontologies retain a trace of this experience. We know from *Generation and Corruption* that the primary contrarieties of *bodies* (hot and cold, dry and wet) are properly known by touch. Touch grants access to materiality as such. A material body’s resistance to the pressure of our flesh expresses its identity. The hypothesis I am proposing here is that the determination of substance as that which is in-itself and by-itself presupposes the auto-affection of touch which is the paradigm of our sensibility in general. The identity of substances is not deduced but encountered; in this sense, the testimony of touch confirms the ontological investigation: what we touch manifests its own being. What matters about the particular is its ability to form an ‘own-ness’ and not simply a ‘one-ness.’ Individuation is not primordially a matter of forming discrete entities (each one counting as ‘one’); rather, it depends on being’s ability to relate to itself, to be “in touch” with itself. Without this, substance wouldn’t have separability and “thisness.”

Although they occupy opposite poles in the hierarchy of the soul, the lowest power of sentient life (touch) and the highest one (thought itself) present important structural similarities. This, however, is not to collapse contemplation into sensation. If by empiricism we mean the reduction of intellection to prior sensory experiences, then Aristotle is not an empiricist. The activity of the *nous* constitutes the extreme upper limit of psyche’s powers and for this reason it is the farthest removed from the sense of touch and, as the *Metaphysics* puts it, “we deem none of the senses to be wisdom, even though they are the most reliable ways of knowing particulars” (*Meta.* 981b10).

Wisdom demands distance without which there is no access to the universal and the explanatory causes of things. Sensation, however, remains authoritative when it comes to the particular. Yet, sensation's epistemic deficiency (sensation never *explains* anything) doesn't prevent it from disclosing primary substances on which genus and species depend. In its own way, sensation *knows* substances.

As we saw, touch retains distance and mediation while "the essence of a thing is what it is said to be in-respect-of-itself (*kath' auto*)" (1029b14). This is why even the authoritative testimony of touch remains an approximation. The determination of substantial being in terms of being in-respect-of-itself does not simply carry the idea of completion but conveys an active sense whereby the act of being is oriented toward itself.³⁸ A sum of attributes cannot provide the fullness and self-sufficiency of substance. Substantial being is in itself, turned toward (*kata*) itself. *Ousia* is not what *stands under* attributes;³⁹ rather, a substantial being must be *selfsame*. This selfsameness of substance determines being as what endures and preserves its ownness. The expressions 'being *qua* being,' 'substance *qua* substance,' '*energeia*,'⁴⁰ '*entelecheia*,' 'body *qua* body' and so forth, bear witness to the fact that the ontological inquiry is guided by the assumption that substance is assessed through self-identity; being is not simply an 'it' but an 'itself.'

Touch reveals that material substances possess a completeness of their own and this essential property is distinct from their other attributes. The resistance of sensible bodies to our touch bears witness to the fact that they confirm their being by excluding alterity.⁴¹ No doubt, sensory experience can only suggest this, but this sensual encounter finds a correspondence on the metaphysical plane. Being attests to its own being by actively aiming back at itself.⁴² This raises a difficulty concerning the very possibility of stating anything about being itself since, by definition, a predication states something about something *else*. A fully uncompounded entity would be a chief instance of *ousia* since it would be totally independent and non-

relational; but for these reasons, nothing could be predicated of it. Remarkably, to convey this point Aristotle appeals to an analogy with touch:

Concerning things that are uncompounded what do 'to be' and 'not to be,' 'truth' and 'falsity' mean? [...] Just as truth about these is not the aim [as in the case of composite beings], so to be is not the same for them. Instead, truth about each of them is to touch [*thigein*] it and to say it (since to say is not the same as to assert), while ignorance is to not touch it (*Meta.* 1051b17-25)

The apprehension of a simple nature in its truth can only be an immediate contact, an intellectual touching. Only an indivisible intuition could fully disclose a simple nature. In this case, falsity wouldn't be a matter of erroneous judgments but a failure to touch the object of thought. This intuition (if it can be achieved), is a touching that discloses its object in its truth.⁴³

What then could be the uncompounded object of an unmediated intellectual intuition? In an absolute sense, the only candidate seems to be the prime mover insofar as it is thought that thinks itself, that is to say, pure auto-affection that does not involve the mediation of flesh.⁴⁴ The prime mover is the unique case of pure actuality which eternally performs its act without mediation or distance. Where sheer identity without alterity is fully realized, mediation does not occur; this is why there is no "outside" for the prime mover. In its auto-affection the prime mover is simultaneously touching and touched, but such an immediacy is reserved to god. As for us, the absence of mediation (sensation without medium, intellection without imagination) would be blindness. No doubt, Aristotle grants us an intuition (a certain touching) that establishes the invariable actuality of an uncompounded substance in its truth. But it remains transitive: it aims at an object that it is not. Even at the level of speculative thinking we cannot fully overcome mediation. At best we may think *of* god, but we cannot think like god. For us, immediacy is irremediably postponed. Whether in sensory touching or in intellectual intuition we are beings of duality and mediation.

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NOTES

- ¹ *De an*, 402b7; also *Meta*. 1072b26-30. Life is an essential property of the god, although in a distinct sense since we cannot say that god “has” a soul.
- ² “Some species of testacea are absolutely motionless, and others not quite but nearly so. Nature, however, has provided them with a protection in the hardness of the shell with which she has invested their body.” *PA*, IV, 7, 683b4
- ³ The active intellect “cannot be affected by or mixed with anything” (430a17). This has been the object of a battle of giants among commentators but cannot be developed in this essay.
- ⁴ Romeyer-Dherbey notices “the sensual – or sensorial – manner of speaking of the intelligible, and the bewildering [*déconcertante*] wealth of the sensible metaphoricalness.” “Voir et toucher, le problème de la prééminence d’un sens chez Aristote,” *Revue de Métaphysique et de Morale* 96, (4) (1991) 454.
- ⁵ In the Neo-Platonic tradition Iamblichus remarks that “in general a part differs from a power in this that the part exhibits a difference of substance, whereas the power exhibits a differentiation in production or creation in the same substrate.” *De anima*, Translation John F. Finamore and John M. Dillon, (Leiden: Brill, 2002) 37.
- ⁶ “The primary kind of perception that belongs to all [animals] is touch; and just as nutrition can exist separately from touch and perception as a whole, so touch can exist separately from all other perceptions” (413b5-7).
- ⁷ Romeyer-Dherbey, *op cit.* 442-448.
- ⁸ Aquinas notices that aesthetics is concerned with two senses only: sight and hearing. “The beautiful is that which calms the desire by being seen or known. Consequently, these senses chiefly regard the beautiful which are the most cognitive viz. sight or hearing as ministering to reason; for we speak of beautiful sights and beautiful sounds. But in reference to the other objects of the other senses, we do not use the expression beautiful; for we do not speak of beautiful taste or beautiful odor” *Summa*, Ia, IIae, Q 27, A 1. Ad.3.
- ⁹ *Contra* Everson’s physicalist interpretation. According to Everson, “what the psychologist should employ is material explanation, where the activity is explained by reference to material changes which are not only necessary but sufficient for determining the activity in question.” Stephen Everson, *Aristotle on Perception*, (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1997) 9. Aristotle, on the contrary, establishes that not only perception but many physiological functions (e.g., digestion) cannot be accounted for in terms of a quantitative addition of matter but that they involve a *qualitative* transformation.
- ¹⁰ For this reason touching is related to *sensus communis*. *Sensus communis* is not a ‘sixth sense’ since it has no corresponding sense organ but a conjoining of the senses into something they all experience even though each represents it in its own way. I can see, taste, and smell coffee but the connection between these I can neither see, nor smell, nor taste. Each one of our senses provides an experience that cannot be translated into the terms of another. Yet, they can perceive the *same* thing. Their difference in medium and proper organ presupposes a deeper common root by means of which they all are species of sensation.

- ¹¹ This distinction has a Platonic antecedent. At *Philebus* 51a-52a Plato classifies the five senses into two groups; touch and taste are deemed “impure” since they are associated with needs. On the other hand, the “noble” senses (smell, hearing, and sight) deal with what remains distant and thereby are more akin to contemplation. This leads Emmanuel Alloa to wonder whether “Aristotle embraced Plato’s intellectualism, turning detachment into the criterion of validity of a sense?” (E. Alloa, “Metaxu. Figures de la médialité chez Aristote,” *Revue de Métaphysique et de Morale*, # 2, 2009, 254). In fact it is on this very issue that Aristotle’s analysis of sensation diverges from Plato’s. Whereas Plato acknowledged in the “noble senses” the necessity of a distance which made them more akin to *theoria*, Aristotle demonstrates that distance is present in *all* sensations. Even touch occurs at a distance.
- ¹² From the fact that all perceptions require mediation it doesn’t follow that we cannot access reality or that our experience is “distorted.” For Aristotle, the medium is not an obstacle but an enabler; it is what permits sensation to occur since a direct contact between the organ and the sensible would result in the destruction of the organ.
- ¹³ In this respect, the sense of smell is problematic. Some animals can smell something that is relatively distant; yet, some contact between the effluence and the nostrils must occur. The investigation of the sense of smell is schematic and appeals to *effluvia*, the invisible flowing out that crosses the distance between the object and the sense organ; suggesting a contact that occurs at, or rather through, a distance.
- ¹⁴ As Jean-Louis Chrétien puts it: “To show that touch involves a sense of proximity is to show that it involves a sense of distance. To touch is to approach or to be approached, not to apply a surface against another. Proximity forgets, through contact, what separates it from the thing that it touches.” *The Call and the Response*, translated by Anne Davenport (New York: Fordham University Press 2004) 89.
- ¹⁵ This supports Bos’s distinction between living and visible body. “This instrumental body is not identical with the visible body [...], but produces, vitalizes the visible body and uses it for locomotion and sensation and for all kinds of praxis” Abraham Bos, *The Soul and its Instrumental Body, A Reinterpretation of Aristotle’s Philosophy of Living Nature* (Leiden: Brill, 2003) 111.
- ¹⁶ “Everything that lives has a soul, and this, as we have said, cannot exist without natural heat.” *On Youth and Old Age*, (*Parva naturalia*, 470a19).
- ¹⁷ This analysis is reminiscent of Merleau-Ponty’s remarks on embodiment. “There is a circle of the touch and the touching; the touch takes hold of the touching.” Merleau-Ponty, *The Visible and the Invisible*, trans. A. Lingis (Evanston: Northwestern University Press 1968) 143. Merleau-Ponty extends this circular structure to other senses, including seeing and the visible.
- ¹⁸ A so-called distance perception such as sight is also instantaneous since Aristotle denies that light travels. Polansky supports my contention here. The point Aristotle is making with the shield example is not about immediacy or simultaneity. See Ronald Polansky, *Aristotle’s De anima*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007) 328-329.
- ¹⁹ As Alloa puts it: “*qua* *dunamis*, the medium of sensation marks the difference between the sensing organ and the sensed object; *qua* *energeia*, it establishes a relation of continuity” *op. cit.* 259.
- ²⁰ Chrétien, *op. cit.* 101.

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- ²¹ This teleological account is true of all senses: “To all those [animals] which possess them they are a means of preservation, in order that they may be aware of their food before they pursue it, and may avoid what is inferior or destructive”(On Sense and Sensible, 436b20-21).
- ²² “Other possess also the potency for thinking as well as intellect [*to dianoētikon te kai nous*] as [is the case] with human beings and any other beings there might be of the same or more honorable kind” (414b18-20).
- ²³ “But we should notice that it is as a *material cause* that he [Aristotle] holds flesh responsible; it does not *make* intelligence, unless as a contributory cause. For because of the conjunction [of the soul and the body], the motions of the soul are disposed along with mixtures of the body; they are not generated by the mixture, but they do not act in this way or that without such a mixture.” John Philoponus *On Aristotle On the Soul*, 2. 7-12, Translated by William Charlton (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2005) 388, 23-26 (75).
- ²⁴ Giancarlo Movia, *Due Studi sul De anima di Aristotele*, (Padova: Editrice Antenore, 1974) 82.
- ²⁵ As Chrétien puts it: “To have a more refined touch is to be as a whole more thoroughly delivered to the world, exposed to it- to respond to it better, through the whole of our body and therefore through the whole of our soul”, *Op. cit.* 104.
- ²⁶ Also: “The distinguishing characteristics of the body *qua* body are tangible” (423b26).
- ²⁷ Alexander of Aphrodisias, *Supplement to “On the Soul,”* translated by R. W. Sharples, (Ithaca: NY: Cornell University Press, 2004) 74.
- ²⁸ The case of amputees raises a further difficulty. In the *Principles of Philosophy* Descartes describes the following case: “There was a girl who had a seriously diseased hand. Whenever the doctor called, they blindfolded her so that she would not be upset by the sight of his surgical equipment. After a few days, her arm was cut off at the elbow, because of advancing gangrene. They then faked up the missing arm with bandages, so that she was completely unaware of her loss. However, she went on complaining that she could feel various pains in different fingers of her amputated hand.” *Princ.* IV, 196. Descartes’s point is that this inner feeling (the amputee feels her fingers) is physically located in the brain and it illustrates the fact that sensation is fundamentally a *mental* event, since it can occur in the absence of an external body.
- ²⁹ On this, see Mark Shiffman’s Introduction to *Aristotle’s De anima* (Newburyport, MA: Focus Publishing, 2010) 22-23 and Johansen’s insistence that in Aristotle there are not two events, a physical event followed by a mental ones (awareness) but only one; namely, the actuality of the sense faculty. There is only one event that admits of two interpretations. It is the actualization of organ and proper sensible, that is, it is the process of sensation in its actuality that is one and the same. T. K. Johansen’s *Aristotle on the Sense-Organs*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997) 288-290.
- ³⁰ Cynthia Freeland rightly insists on this. See her “Aristotle on the Sense of Touch,” in *Essays on Aristotle’s De Anima*, ed. by Martha Nussbaum and Amélie Rorty,(Oxford: O. U. P., 2003) 232.
- ³¹ At 421a20 Aristotle already claimed that smell is analogous to taste while taste itself “is a certain type of touch.”

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- ³² “Either there are two senses perceiving the same thing, or there is one that itself perceives itself. Moreover, if sight were perceived by another sense, either this would go on to infinity, or there would be some sense that perceives itself. Thus, one might as well make sight that way in the first place.” (425b15-17).
- ³³ Daniel Heller-Roazen, *The Inner Touch, Archeology of a Sensation*, (New York: Zone Books, 2009) 37.
- ³⁴ Mentioned by Heller-Roazen *op. cit.* 38 and Chrétien *op.cit.* 108. By contrast, Pavel Gregoric resists an identification and talks of a “coincidence” between touch and common sense. Gregoric insists that Aristotle mentions the organ of touch because “no other sense organ can be found without that of touch” (168). Furthermore, “sleep and waking are affections of the sense organ of touch” while there is some common power which accompanies all the senses. But if, as Gregoric claims, wake is a matter of perceiving that one perceives while sleep is the corresponding lack thereof, and if this is an affection of touch, it becomes impossible to claim that the “*malisth’ huparchei*” Aristotle talks about simply indicates a coincidence as Gregoric suggests. If it “belongs most eminently” it isn’t just a coincidence. See Pavel Gregoric, *Aristotle on the Common Sense*, (Oxford: OUP, 2007) 168.
- ³⁵ As Heller-Roazen has recently argued, the pre-modern psychology makes of sense-perception and self-awareness not forms of cognition or consciousness but rather forms of sensation. “It may be that the significance of the primary sensation of the classical philosopher lies not in its proximity to the modern notion of consciousness but in its removal from it.” Heller-Roazen, *op. cit.* 40.
- ³⁶ Among contemporary commentators this is the position held by Charles Kahn, for instance. See Charles Kahn, “Aristotle on Thinking” in *Essays on Aristotle’s De anima*, 370-371.
- ³⁷ Joseph Magee, *Unmixing the Intellect*, (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 2003) 134.
- ³⁸ The reason why form is a better candidate than matter to the title of substantial being is that form exists as *entelecheia* (see 412a5-12).
- ³⁹ This would fit with the Latin ‘sub-stantia’ — which corresponds to the Greek *hupokeimenon* but precisely *not* to *ousia*. *Metaphysics Z* explicitly rejects the identification of *ousia* with *hupokeimenon*. “If we proceed on this view [if we equate *ousia* with underlying subject] matter would turn out to be *ousia*; but this is impossible since separability and thisness seem to belong to *ousia* above all” (*Meta.* 1029a26-28).
- ⁴⁰ *Metaphysics Q* stresses the simultaneity of doing and being done in *energeia*: “But one has seen the same thing *at the same time* as one is seeing it, and things at the same time as one has thought, this sort of thing is what I call an internal activity.” (*Meta.* 1048b34-35). Seeing or knowing as *energeia* is a matter of *being* what one *does*.
- ⁴¹ It is essential to the substance of an individual that it be “peculiar to it and belongs to nothing else” (*Meta.* 1038b10).
- ⁴² Parmenides’s description of being as a “well-rounded sphere” expresses the fullness of being as the act of excluding void, emptiness, and division. The sphere analogy (Fr. 8.43) is not meant to suggest that being is a body. Rather, it posits that being posits itself by excluding what it is not/what is not. “[Being] is not divisible, for it is all alike; [Being] is not to a greater degree here, for this would prevent its cohesion; [Being] is not to a lesser degree there, it is wholly filled with what is. Hence, it is wholly continuous, *for what is approaches [pelazei] what is*” (Fr. 8.22-25). The second part of verse 25 is often translated as: “what is is in contact with (or touches) what is” probably

because this is the supporting claim of “it is all continuous” which suggests juxtaposition. Yet, juxtaposition and contact presuppose plurality (which Parmenides excludes); furthermore, *pelazein* is an action verb; it designates a movement of approaching or nearing. The continuity of being is not static but dynamic. Being’s active rejection of void or lack is its continuous *act* of nearing itself.

⁴³ Insofar as human thought depends on the mediation of images, humans can only approximate such an intuitive grasp.

⁴⁴ Aristotle’s God possesses self-referentiality, but it constitutes a *self* that is not “someone.”

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