



The Powers of Aristotle's Soul

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BOOK REVIEWS

Thomas Kjeller Johansen: *The Powers of Aristotle's Soul*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012, pp. 376. £45.00 (hb). ISBN 9780199658435.

What is a living being's soul? How does the soul account for the action and movement of living beings? How is a living being's soul related to its body? Aristotle's psychology, which deals with these and related questions, assumes that the soul is the principle of functional organization of all the activities of a living natural body. Thus, the domain of Aristotle's inquiry is much broader than the remit of modern psychology, and spans all living beings – humans, animals and plants. What guides Aristotle is his general interest in the explanation of natural phenomena. In light of this approach it is therefore not surprising that Aristotle applies in his account of the soul concepts drawn from his broader metaphysical theory. Thus, the study of Aristotle's psychology can cast light on Aristotle's metaphysics as well as on his philosophy of mind. Additionally, as the study of Aristotle's metaphysics has proven heuristic for current metaphysics, so the study of his psychology (which is relatively less advanced) promises to be rewarding. In the early 80s Jerry Fodor, for example, had already drawn attention to Aristotle's insight that a variety of psychological phenomena in a multitude of different kinds of living beings could be explained systematically with reference to a few capacities or faculties viewed as constitutive of their souls. Thus, Fodor took Aristotle to be a forerunner of what is known nowadays as *faculty psychology*. Johansen's new study of Aristotle's psychology sets out to give scholarly support to Fodor's view. In doing so, Johansen makes an important contribution to our understanding of Aristotle, with coverage of an impressive range of topics and detailed, often compelling readings of the relevant texts.

In addition to the issue of textual support, which any interpretation has to address, the two most important questions that a faculty-psychology reading of Aristotle's theory of the soul has to engage with are these: how many and which capacities are explanatorily basic? And how do they stand in relation to one another? But first, pivotal to a sound understanding of the explanatory role of capacities in the context of Aristotle's psychology is of course a sound understanding of Aristotle's general definition of capacity. Johansen reports that for Aristotle 'capacities ... are determined and defined by the activities that fulfill them', and comments that:

the categorical diversity of the changes that define the soul's capacities gives rise to a question about the soul's unity ... [C]ategorically different items

enter into the essence of the soul. Does the soul not end up as a categorical hodgepodge of entities? (80–1)

Johansen replies that capacities all belong to the same ontological category, namely *relation*; as indicated by *Metaphysics* V 15 which mentions knowledge and perception as examples of relations (82). This is an accurate report of what Aristotle writes, but the reader is left wanting for an explanation from Johansen. What is the ontological status of capacities? Are they relations? If so, what do they relate? And how would this presumed Aristotelian view handle the metaphysical difficulties arising from a relational account of capacities? Such questions have generated much discussion in the history of metaphysics and are extensively debated in the contemporary literature on power ontology.¹ It would have been helpful to the reader to find more about this topic in Johansen's book. Furthermore, even if all the soul's constituents fall under the same ontological category, this would not be in itself an account of the soul's unity – which is the question Johansen set out to answer.

Turning now to the question that drives Johansen's faculty-psychology reading of Aristotle: how many capacities are explanatorily basic in accounting for what the soul is responsible for in a living being? If one were to posit too many basic capacities, this would be a violation of the principle of ontological parsimony that any good theory wants to abide to; but too few would leave some of the phenomena unexplained. Aristotle defines capacities in terms of the activities that fulfil them; to examine whether the number and types of capacities Johansen counts as part of the soul's essence are appropriate I will here concentrate on a particular activity of the soul as a case study: our multisensory experience of the external world. Our perceptual experience of the world is multisensory when it involves more than one perceptual faculty at once, e.g. when we discriminate white from sweet, or when we perceive, e.g. movement, which does not fall under the remit of any one of the five senses exclusively. Perceiving movement, which is a 'common perception', for Aristotle, clearly requires a distinct type of perceptual activity from the 'special' perception whereby sight sees colour. The question is whether it requires positing a basic perceptual faculty, or if not, how this perceptual activity is performed. Johansen argues along the same 'deflationary' line as Pavel Gregoric (2007). The stance is clear: 'the common sense [responsible for multisensory perceptual content] does not point to a capacity over and above the individual sense, even one that is somehow constituted by the individual senses' (178).

But how then is multisensory perceptual content acquired? Johansen answers: common perception 'points to an ability that each of the senses have' (in this sense, their 'common' power), by analogy with 'the ability that each of the players [of a football team] has to control the ball, on top

¹I use in this context the terms 'powers', 'capacities' and 'abilities' as synonymous.

of the different specialized abilities that might be characteristic of the goal keeper, the striker, or the defender as such' (179). But a football player's ability to control the ball is in fact *more basic* than the capacity for striking, defending, goal keeping, etc. If we follow the analogy through, multisensory perception and its corresponding capacity ought to be the most basic perceptual activity of each sense, more basic than the specialized perceptual activity and ability of each sense. But neither Aristotle, nor Johansen I take it, would agree to this.

The problem I find with Johansen's explanation of the role of the common power of each sense through the analogy of the ability of the players to control the ball is that the player's ability is not an extra ability each player has, but the generic classification of each player's ability *qua* striker, defender, and such. But the common perceptual power each sense has, is not the genus of that sense's perceptual ability. Assuming that it leads to the results mentioned in the previous paragraph.

There is a further difficulty with the more general stance Johansen takes on the common power of each sense. He takes it that each of the senses can perceive the common sensibles like number, shape, movement, etc., through the common power it has (179). But the common sensibles are perceptually complex sensibles. That is, for Aristotle, shape is tactile and visual; it is not that an object has tactile shape and also visual shape; rather, the shape of the object is one and the same, and it can be perceived through more than one sense. If, as Johansen believes, for Aristotle, each sense is capable of perceiving the common sensibles through its common power, then sight ought to be able to perceive a sensible that is tactile, namely shape. But sight cannot do this, because it is limited to perceiving through its sense organ, which is not sensitive to tactile sensibles. In general, the common power of each sense cannot be sensitive to multisensory sensibles, because it depends on the specific sense organ of the respective sense. Rather, Aristotle's introduction of the common power is to facilitate a cooperation between the senses, giving rise to a perceptual faculty whose abilities transcend those of each sense. But I cannot expound on Aristotle's account here.

The deflationary approach to the status of the common sense appears equally problematic when Johansen comes to give an account of the perceptual discrimination of, e.g. yellow from bitter. He writes that:

Aristotle says that the individual senses perceive that the yellow is the same as the bitter by virtue of being one, rather than themselves. ... He is not saying that another capacity than the individual senses perceive the accidental perceptibles, but that the individual senses perceive as one rather than as individuals. (183)

Johansen further explains the senses perceiving as one should be understood as follows:

To return to our football analogy, the senses are now considered not like the individual players who have the same skill but as players who have a skill by virtue of playing together, like the skill of winning matches. This is not a separate capacity but a capacity the capacities have by virtue of working together. (183)

But how do they get this capacity merely from their togetherness? The oneness of the senses working together must be explained metaphysically for it to have explanatory force in multisensory perception. Consider the following scenario: a monolingual French woman and a monolingual English woman are each reading a document in their own language. Is there a way in which they could cooperate to tell whether the contents of the two documents are the same or different, without requiring an extra capacity other than their own capacities to understand their respective texts? How can the analogy of the ‘players who have a skill by virtue of playing together’ help us understand how the two women can discern sameness or difference in their texts, if they do not understand each other’s language? How can the analogy help us understand how senses with different types of sense organs work together to perceive multisensory contents?

I take it that accidental perception is the key to Johansen’s interpretation of Aristotle. Although he does not explain this explicitly, I take it that Johansen sees accidental perception as corresponding to the ability of the players to pass the ball to each other. According to Johansen, Aristotle’s account of accidental perception is his way of enriching the perceiver’s perceptual range; Johansen writes:

Accidental perception allows perception to be even richer in content than does common perception. We can see that the white is sweet by accidental perception, though sight as such does not inform us of sweetness, and we can see that this is the son of Diares, though no special sense as such is primed to grasp this kind of information. (180)

But is this what Aristotle says? Following Johansen’s translation, ‘one perceives this [the son of Diares] accidentally because this [the son of Diares] which is perceived belongs to white, and that is why nothing suffers by the perceptible as such [as son of Diares]’ (418a20-4)’ (181). So Aristotle says that we perceive the son of Diares, by perceiving the white. He does not say that we perceive *that* this is the son of Diares’ (my emphasis). We could not perceive it, because no sense organ is sensitive to ‘being the son of Diares’. Nor does sight ‘see *that* the white is sweet’ (180, my emphasis); it could not, but can only see the sweet, because the white happens to be sweet. The link is ontological, not perceptual; external, not part of the perceptual content. More generally, for Aristotle, accidental perception on its own cannot allow for multimodal perception, for the reason that each sense, by itself, can be aware of only contents of a single

sensory modality. Suppose that the French and the English women read the same text, each in her own language translation. We could say that the French woman understood the text the English woman was reading, but not that she understood that she was reading the same text as the English woman.

Coming now to the second question relevant to the faculty-psychology interpretation: how do the capacities of the soul stand in relation to each other? Johansen casts the question in these terms: Are the soul's capacities 'modular' or 'holistic'? That is,

can the capacities be conceived of independently of each other or do we need to define them in relation to the work they do within the whole living being? Are they operationally independent from each other or do they only execute their functions through cooperation? (5)

Johansen helps us to make very good progress in understanding Aristotle's views by arguing persuasively that Aristotle gives two different answers to the same question in two different contexts of inquiry:

when the *De Anima* defines the capacities as constitutive parts of the soul, the approach is modular; when using them, as in the biological works, to explain a further variety of life behavior in different living beings the approach is holistic. (6)

In conclusion, Johansen's book, from which there is much to be learned, advances our understanding of Aristotle's psychology in ways that will engage both Aristotelian scholars and those interested in the philosophy of mind and the development of modern psychology.

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Eckart Förster and Yitzhak Y. Melamed (eds.): *Spinoza and German Idealism*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012, pp. 285. £62.00 (hb). ISBN 9781197021983.

German Idealism is commonly thought to occupy the temporal space between Kant and Hegel. This book, an edited collection based on a 2010 conference, presents a case for it occupying the intellectual space between Kant and Spinoza. The premise is that 'without Spinoza, German Idealism would have been just as impossible as it would have been without Kant' (1). The nature and extent of Spinoza's influence on the thinkers of this