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Presence, Being, and “Perceiving that We Perceive”

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*De Anima* 3.2 opens abruptly with the account of a phenomenon that Aristotle calls “perceiving that we perceive,” in which he attempts to explain how we become aware that we are perceiving.[[1]](#footnote-1) When we consider its wider context within the *De Anima*, we might wonder why this phenomenon should come up for discussion where it does. As it is, Aristotle’s remarks on perceiving that we perceive seem to disrupt what is an otherwise orderly progression of thought, from *De Anima* 2.6 until the end of 3.2, focused consistently on the various perceptible features of perceptible things, like their being *white* or *sweet* or *moving* or *cube-shaped* or *both white and sweet*.[[2]](#footnote-2) It is not obvious why Aristotle should change topics in the midst of this broader account, away from our awareness of the *things* we perceive, and towards our awareness of our own perceiving. Even if, as some have suggested, our awareness *that* we are perceiving is no different from our awareness of *what* we are perceiving,[[3]](#footnote-3) it is hard to see why Aristotle would disrupt his account in order to make such general remarks on the nature of perceptual awareness.

It is possible, of course, that this is simply an oddity or imperfection in the construction of the *De Anima*. But if we read Aristotle’s account of perceiving that we perceive with its wider context in view, we put ourselves in a position to see his discussion in a new light. What Aristotle actually establishes at the beginning of *De Anima* 3.2 is that we are able to discern the presence of things through the senses themselves, or that the things we perceive are *here* and *now*. What does this have to do with perceiving that we perceive? So long as we take for granted, with the majority of Aristotle’s contemporary readers, that “perceiving that we perceive” is Aristotle’s name for reflexive awareness in general, or our consciousness of being conscious, the connection will escape us.[[4]](#footnote-4) As we will see, however, “perceiving that we perceive” is a term of distinction. It marks the everyday fact that when we are perceiving something, it does not escape our notice that we are *perceiving* it and not, say, *remembering* it. And what distinguishes perceiving from remembering and other modes of cognition “from inside,” or from our own perspective, is our awareness that what appears to us is present, here and now.

Still, we should wonder why Aristotle discusses our capacity to grasp something’s presencewhere he does, at the beginning of *De Anima* 3.2. Something’s *presence*, after all, is not an attribute like its redness or sphericity. When we become aware of something’s color or shape, we grasp something about it that obtains independently of any relation it has to us. Our awareness of something’s presence, by contrast, its being here and now, is an awareness not of something that characterizes it as it is in itself, but only in relation to ourselves. In the final section of the paper, I will argue that our awareness of something’s presence is an awareness of its *being* or *existence*: an awareness *that it is* at all, as opposed to not. And unlike “present,” “existent” does characterize things independently of any relation they bear to us. By drawing attention to our capacity to discern the presence of things, Aristotle is making good on his frequent assertion that the *being* of things is manifest to us in perception.[[5]](#footnote-5) In *De Anima* 3.2, then, he is simply continuing with his account of the various perceptible features of perceptible things. His basic goal is to help us see that although something’s *being*, or *existence*, is not there to be seen just like its color, or felt like its texture, it nevertheless becomes manifest in perception. He does so by demonstrating that our very ability to know that we are perceiving as opposed to, say, remembering, depends on the capacity to see, as it were, that what appears to us, exists.

I.

Aristotle’s remarks on perceiving that we perceive open with the statement that

since we perceive that we are seeing and hearing, one must perceive that he sees either by sight, or by some sense other than sight.[[6]](#footnote-6)

Without considering the context in which this claim appears, it is difficult to understand why Aristotle’s account begins this way. As many readers have seen, *De Anima* 3.1 and 3.2 are a response to the picture of perception developed in Plato’s *Theaetetus*.[[7]](#footnote-7) In the dialogue, Socrates allows that qualities like “hot, hard, light, sweet,” and so on are perceived through the body’s five senses, but maintains that we become aware of “being and not-being, likeness and unlikeness, same and different; also one, and any other number”[[8]](#footnote-8) not through the senses themselves, but in our rational reflection upon the deliverances of the senses.[[9]](#footnote-9) In these chapters of the *De Anima*, Aristotle is expanding the scope of perceptual awareness far beyond what is admitted in the *Theaetetus*. In *De Anima* 3.1, he argues that the five senses are themselves sufficient for perceiving not only their proper objects, like color, sound, and texture, but also what he calls the “common sensibles”: movement, rest, figure, magnitude, number, and unity.[[10]](#footnote-10) In *De Anima* 3.2, Aristotle continues on this theme. He argues first that we “perceive that we perceive” through the five senses alone, and then, in the second half of the chapter, that no additional sense is needed to explain our capacity to perceive sameness and difference, as when we perceive that the same cube of sugar is both white and sweet.

Having stated, then, that we perceive that we perceive—that we see, that we hear, and so on—Aristotle asks whether it is by sight that we perceive that we see, or by some other sense. (Whatever he determines about sight will hold *mutatis mutandis* for the other senses as well.) Next,[[11]](#footnote-11) he rules out through a regress argument that we perceive that we see by some sense other than sight:

If the sense which is of sight were other than sight, then either they will go on to infinity or there will be some sense that is of itself, with the result that one should grant this about the first sense.[[12]](#footnote-12)

His reasoning is compressed, but simple. If we do not perceive that we see by *sight,* then we must do so through some other sense. Since we neither *hear* nor *smell* nor *taste* nor *feel* that we see, we must postulate some sixth sense by which we perceive that we see. But then we have to ask whether the activity of this sixth sense is perceived by the sixth sense itself, or by some other sense. If the sixth sense perceives its own activity, why could not sight? So we will have to postulate a seventh sense to perceive the activity of the sixth, and then an eighth to perceive the activity of the seventh, and so on *ad infinitum.* Since only if an *actual* infinity threatened would Aristotle’s regress be vicious, he must take for granted that whenever we see, we perceive that we see.[[13]](#footnote-13) Elsewhere, he states this explicitly. In *De Sensu,* he claims that “it is not possible to be unaware of perceiving and of seeing something seen,”[[14]](#footnote-14) and in the *Nicomachean Ethics,* he says that “he who sees perceives that he sees, and he who hears, that he hears,”[[15]](#footnote-15) where this is clearly a statement about what is always the case.[[16]](#footnote-16)

By this point in the argument, Aristotle already takes himself to have proven that we must perceive that we see by sight and, by extension, that no senses beyond the five are necessary for perceiving that we perceive.[[17]](#footnote-17) Still, he admits that something about his conclusion seems perplexing (ἔχει δ᾽ἀπορίαν)[[18]](#footnote-18):

If to perceive by sight is to see, and what is seen is color or what has color, then if someone sees what sees, what sees must have color.[[19]](#footnote-19)

Although the precise nature of Aristotle’s worry will shortly become clear, his general concern is easy enough to grasp. He has concluded that we perceive that we see by sight. But if the sense of sight merely puts us in touch with colors, how can it also discern our seeing?

Aristotle resolves the difficulty by pointing out that it rests on an unduly restrictive conception of sight: “It is clear that perceiving by sight is not one thing,”[[20]](#footnote-20)

for even when we do not see, we discern by sight both darkness and light, though not in the same way.[[21]](#footnote-21)

He then goes on to admit that “what sees *is*, in a sense, colored.”[[22]](#footnote-22) He reminds his readers of his claim in *De Anima* 2.12 that in perception, the perceptual organ receives the form of a perceptible object without its matter,[[23]](#footnote-23) and explains that this is “why even when the perceptible objects are gone, the perceptions and imaginings continue to exist in the sense-organs.”[[24]](#footnote-24)

With these obscure remarks, Aristotle’s account of perceiving that we perceive comes to a close. Since Kosman’s seminal essay on the topic, the literature has focused on this last stage of Aristotle’s account, the claim that the organ of sight does, in a way, become colored. Kosman saw in the former statement a reference to Aristotle’s doctrine that “the actuality of the object of perception” and “the actuality of perception” are one and the same in number.[[25]](#footnote-25) (Or, in a less cumbrous formula, that something’s being perceived is one and the same occurrence as someone’s perceiving it.) Kosman, and others following him,[[26]](#footnote-26) took this to mean that there must be “a single awareness” of both the object of perception and of one’s perceiving it, or, in other words, that there is in fact no distinction between perceiving *what* we perceive and perceiving *that* we perceive.

It is easy to see why this view has been so appealing to so many. Suppose that I am looking at a green leaf. No matter how closely I examine the green leaf, I will never see my *seeing it* there alongside its greenness, shape, and size. My *seeing* is not there to be seen in the thing that I see, but neither is it “here in me” to be felt, so to speak—there is nothing that it “feels like” to *see* something, and which lets me know that I am seeing and not engaged in some other activity. Given that I do not become aware of my own seeing by noticing something about the *object* of my awareness or by noticing something going on in *myself*, it is tempting to conclude that there is simply no such thing as the awareness of *seeing* the green leaf over and above the awareness of the green leaf itself. And so, as Kosman famously put it, “perception of perception is just perception of the object of perception.”[[27]](#footnote-27)

But *is* my awareness of the green leaf the very same thing as my awareness of *seeing* it? Although Kosman may well be right that my awareness of the leaf and my awareness of *seeing* it belong to one and the same act, it simply does not follow that my awareness of the leaf and my awareness of *seeing* it are identical. Indeed, it is rather clear that they must be different. Kosman ignores the fact that I can also remember the leaf, or imagine it. In being aware of the leaf I cannot *eo ipso* be aware of *seeing* it: if I am remembering it, then although I *am* aware of the leaf, I am aware not of *seeing* it, but of *having seen* it before.[[28]](#footnote-28) This mundane observation is a serious problem for Kosman’s interpretation, and these differences between perceiving and other modes of consciousness like remembering will be of crucial importance later in this essay. For now, it is enough to see that Kosman’s position is untenable: being aware of *perceiving* cannot be the very same thing as being aware of *what* I perceive, since what I now perceive I can later remember.[[29]](#footnote-29)

What, then, should one make of Aristotle’s claim that the organ of sight takes on the color of what is perceived? In fact, this is *not* his explanation of how we perceive that we perceive. Instead, he is clearing up a confusion that his own *aporia* could have generated. In his *aporia,* Aristotle had worried that if we perceive that we see by sight, the organ of sight would have to be colored. Someone who has just read *De Anima* 2.12 is likely to wonder why Aristotle presents this possibility as if it were absurd, since he had there claimed that the organ of sight *does*, in some sense,take on the color of what is seen.[[30]](#footnote-30) Here in 3.2, he now hastens to make clear that this possibility is not inherently absurd, but is indeed his own position. What is absurd is not that the organ of sight is in some sense colored, but that this fact might explain how we perceive that we see. Aristotle’s regress argument proved that we perceive that we see by *sight,* but he worries that he will be taken to mean that perceiving that we see is a matter of the eye’s seeing itself. And if sight were only of color, what else *could* his statement mean? Perceiving that we see would have to be a matter of seeing something colored—not the original object of sight, but the thing engaged in the act of seeing, the organ of sight. Perceiving that I see would have to be a matter of quite literally seeing my eye seeing, that is, of seeing my eye take on a particular color. This is theabsurdity that Aristotle wants to avoid.

He diffuses the problem by pointing out that “perceiving by sight is not one thing”: we also discern light and darkness by sight. This claim, then, is Aristotle’s solution to the *aporia.* Unfortunately, it has not generated much discussion in the literature. (This is probably due to the lasting influence of Kosman’s essay.) Those who do remark on it typically take Aristotle to be suggesting that since sight is not in fact only of color but is also, for instance, of light and darkness, it might be of other things, too, like, for example, one’s own *seeing*.[[31]](#footnote-31)Although this reading succeeds to some extent in resolving the *aporia* by undermining the assumption upon which it rests, that sight is only of color, it does not at all explain what it means for sight to be “of itself.” Indeed, on this reading, it was not essential that Aristotle mention the discrimination of light and darkness. He could just as easily have referred his readers to the previous chapter, where he had already argued that sight is not only of color, but also of movement, rest, figure, magnitude, number, and unity—if it was already of these other things, it might as well be of one’s *seeing*, too. On this interpretation, Aristotle’s claim that we discern light and darkness is closer to a gesture of resignation or exasperation than to an explanation of perceiving that we perceive. And indeed, some think that his discussion ends aporetically.[[32]](#footnote-32)

A more promising interpretation was suggested by both Themistius and Simplicius, who noticed that “discerning darkness” sounds very much like perceiving that we do *not* see.[[33]](#footnote-33) When it is dark, after all, we do not see, but this manner of “not seeing” is different from the way in which an unconscious person does not see. The unconscious person, one might say, simply does not see, while the person peering into the darkness is aware that he does not see: that is, he perceives that he does not see. And most importantly, he perceives that he does not see *by sight*—how else could he tell that it is dark? Themistius drew the obvious conclusion: “By whichever sense we perceive that we do *not* see, by that very same sense we perceive that we see—and this will be sight.”[[34]](#footnote-34)

These commentators were on the right track, but they did not reach the heart of the matter. Neither author troubles himself to state exactly what we are aware of, when we discern light and darkness. This means that when they identify discerning the light with perceiving that we see, we have not really learned what it means to perceive that we see. In order to understand why Aristotle is drawing attention to our capacity to discern light and darkness, we need to consider the phenomenon more closely. What it is that we are aware of, when we are aware of light and darkness?

II.

It is not an entirely straightforward matter to answer this question. Although we clearly tell by sight that it is light or dark—we have to *look*—light and darkness are, in a sense, invisible. As Aristotle puts it, darkness is the privation of light, light is just the actual transparency of transparent bodies[[35]](#footnote-35)*­*—that is, their *being transparent*—and transparency is not visible in its own right.[[36]](#footnote-36) What, then, does it mean for us to discern light by sight? Suppose I want to know whether it is light out. I throw open the blinds, I am presented with manifold colors, shapes, movements, etc., and I am aware straightaway that it is light. I see that it is light, even though the light is not one of the many things I see: I do not see the green trees, a bird’s movement across the sky, the red paint of a car, and *also* the light. It is somehow *in* becoming aware of the red paint or the green trees that I become aware of the light, even though the light is neither the redness of the paint nor the greenness of the trees, nor there alongside these colors to be seen. What is it, then, to become aware of the light?

Is it to become aware that things *appear* to me? Something’s *appearing*, after all,does not itself appear to us—we become aware of its appearing *in* the appearance of its colors, shapes, and so on. But this suggestion is far too general to be helpful. I am aware that things *appear* to me not only when I am perceiving, but also when I am remembering or imagining something. To be aware that things appear to me *simpliciter*, then, would mean something like “to be aware of being aware.” But being aware of the light is not simply being aware of being aware. It is to be aware of something that obtains *now* and *in my vicinity*, *here*. I am aware, for instance, that it is light here, by the fire, but not over there, in the trees. Is our awareness of the light an awareness of being-appeared-to here and now? Not quite: *whatever* appears to me, appears to me here and now.[[37]](#footnote-37) If I remember my childhood home, it appears to me here and now. It does not, however, appear to me to *be* here and now, but rather *there* and *then*, so to speak.[[38]](#footnote-38) When I am aware of the light, in other words, I am aware not only that things appear to me here and now, but that they themselves *are* here and now. My awareness of the light is an awareness, it seems, of the *presence* of the things that appear to me, their being *here* and *now*.[[39]](#footnote-39)

Our awareness of darkness can be understood along similar lines. As we already saw, someone who wakes up into total darkness does not see anything at all, but this kind of “not seeing” is different from the sense in which an unconscious person does not see: the person awake in the darkness is *aware* that she does not see. But this is not yet what it means to be aware of darkness. Someone with her eyes closed is also aware that she does not see, but she is not aware that it is dark out. What distinguishes her from the person with eyes wide in total darkness? Part of the answer is that they are aware of doing different things—shutting or opening their eyes.[[40]](#footnote-40) But the more pertinent difference is that although both are aware of *not seeing,* only the person with her eyes open is aware *that nothing can be seen*.[[41]](#footnote-41)The person awake in the darkness is aware, in other words, of the *absence* of anything visible, that there is nothing visible here and now.[[42]](#footnote-42) The person with her eyes closed, by contrast, makes no claim as to how things are. (Anyone uncomfortable with the thought that we perceive absence should consider Aristotle’s remark that we perceive something’s being at rest by perceiving its *not* moving, i.e. by noticing the absence of any movement: αἰσθανόμεθα…τὸ δ᾽ἠρεμοῦν τῷ μὴ κινεῖσθαι.[[43]](#footnote-43))

If Aristotle’s claim that we perceive light and darkness is meant to call attention to our capacity to perceive the presence and absence of things, then he is simply reminding his readers of a common refrain from *De Anima* 2, that perception is not only of the perceptible, but also, in a sense, of the imperceptible.[[44]](#footnote-44) We see not only color, but also light and darkness; we hear not only sounds, but also silence; we feel not only the tangible, but also the intangible. Just as being aware of darkness is a matter of being aware of the absence from oneself of anything visible, so is the awareness of silence the awareness of the absence of anything audible, and the awareness of intangibility the awareness of the absence of anything tangible. And just as we can discern absence by the individual senses themselves—we tell that it is quiet by *listening*, that there is nothing tangible by *feeling around*, etc.—so are the individual senses capable of discerning presence. This is most obvious in the case of sight, where our awareness of light must be understood as an awareness not of the particular features of perceptible things, but of their very presence. (It may be for this reason that Aristotle chooses the example of sight in the passage.) But the same is true of the other senses. A man can, for instance, reach into a dark closet to determine whether anything is there. As soon as his hand meets with something, he will become aware not only of its particular tangible characteristics, but also of its presence.

It is worth lingering on this point. Suppose it is a coat in the man’s closet. In what sense does he become aware of its presence in addition to, say, its heft and roughness? The coat’s presence is not there to be felt alongside these other characteristics. Is it felt at all? One is compelled to answer “Yes”: it is *by touch* that he becomes aware of its being there.[[45]](#footnote-45) But its presence is not felt in the same way as its texture or weight. It is in feeling these particular characteristics that the man feels its presence, and yet the coat’s presence is not for all that identical with its roughness, hardness, and so on. After all, its being there in the closet is not the same as its being rough or heavy—the coat could soften over the years, but it would nonetheless *be there*. Neither is becoming *aware* of its being there the same thing as becoming aware of its roughness or weight. If the coat had softened, the man would be no less aware of its presence. (He might fail to recognize it—that is a different matter.) In short, the man discerns that there is something in the closet by touch, even though its *being there* is not itself there to be felt. The coat’s roughness and heft are not its “being there,” but are, so to speak, the manner in which it makes its presencefelt.

Aristotle’s argument about perceiving that we perceive seems, then, to turn on his insight that in perceiving, we grasp the presence of things. But what does this have to do with perceiving that we perceive? Becoming aware of something’s *presence* and becoming aware of *one’s own perceiving* might seem so different that it is hard to see what the one could have to do with the other. Here, it is essential to realize that to become aware of something is not necessarilyto become aware of its *presence.* This is, instead, *distinctive* of perception. Indeed, in calling attention to our capacity to discern something’s presence, Aristotle is bringing into view what may be the most important or anyway the most characteristic fact about perception: that it is of what is present. This is *the* fact by which he distinguishes perception from other modes of cognition in *De Memoria*. Anticipation, he tells us, is of what will be(τοῦ μέλλοντος), memory is of what has happened (τοῦ γενομένου), and perception is of what is present (τοῦ παρόντος).[[46]](#footnote-46)

Most important of all, these facts do not escape us while we are in the act of perceiving, remembering, or anticipating. This is of decisive importance for understanding what it means to perceive that we perceive. Aristotle does not tire of repeating this point with regard to memory in *De Memoria.* He insists that

whenever one remembers [something], he must say within himself (ἐν τῇ ψυχῇ λέγει) that he heard or perceived or thought of it before.[[47]](#footnote-47)

As he puts it shortly thereafter, “Whenever one remembers having seen or heard or learnt something, he perceives in addition…that it happened before (προσαισθάνεται ὅτι πρότερον); and before and after are in time.”[[48]](#footnote-48) For this reason, “every memory is bound up with time” (διὸ μετὰ χρόνου πᾶσα μνήμη),[[49]](#footnote-49) and remembering requires a consciousness of time.[[50]](#footnote-50) These remarks help us to properly hear Aristotle’s claim that memory is “of the past.” It is not merely that what I remember must be something from the past. I must also be positively aware *that* it is past, that it once *was*. What is more, I must recognize that it is from *my* past: that I *heard* or *saw* it before, for instance. Memory is not just of what *was*, but of what was once *present* to me.

It is not only memory that is “bound up with time” (μετὰ χρόνου). Aristotle makes a similar claim about perception in *De Anima* 3.2 itself, shortly after his account of perceiving that we perceive. While discussing our capacity to perceive differences between things (ὅτι διαφέρει),[[51]](#footnote-51) Aristotle claims that “the time is not accidental” to the perception (οὐ κατὰ συμβεβηκὸς τὸ ὅτε).[[52]](#footnote-52) The time *is* accidental to an assertion “when I *now* assert a difference but do not assert that there is *now* a difference” (νῦν λέγω ὅτι ἕτερον, οὐ μέντοι ὅτι νῦν ἕτερον).[[53]](#footnote-53) Although, for instance, I might *now* say that the numbers one and two are different, I do not mean that they are different *now* rather than some other time—I do not mean to make a statement about time at all. But when I perceive that the color of this wall is different from the color of that wall, I am not only *now* aware of the difference, but also that the difference obtains *now.* As Aristotle puts it, I perceive “both now and *that* it is now” (καὶ νῦν καὶ ὅτι νῦν).[[54]](#footnote-54) This claim cannot be limited to the perception of differences: whatever I perceive, the time is “not accidental” to the perception. When I now see something white, I am aware that it is *now* white. When I see something moving, I am aware that it is *now* moving. What I perceive, then, shows up to me as *now*, and also as *somewhere*—here, there, in the distance, etc. Perception is “of the present” not only because it is of things which are present, but also because we grasp the things we perceive *as present*, as here and now.

When I glance out the window and see someone on the street, I become aware not only of the color of his shirt or of his height, but also of his *presence* on the street: his *being there, now.* What should now be clear is that this makes for a difference between perceiving, remembering, and anticipating “from inside,” or from the point of view of the person engaged in these acts. I can perceive the man, but I can also remember seeing him, and anticipate seeing him again. When I remember him, I am no longer aware that he *is* there, but that he *was.* If I anticipate seeing him when I look outside again, I am aware that he *will be* there (or *may be*). This explains Aristotle’s claim that “it cannot escape one’s notice that he is remembering” (λανθάνειν μεμνημένον οὐκ ἔστιν),[[55]](#footnote-55) a statement almost identical in formulation to his claim that “it cannot escape one’s notice that he is perceiving” (μὴ ἔστι λανθάνειν αἰσθανόμενον).[[56]](#footnote-56) We are not confused whether we are perceiving, remembering, or anticipating, because it does not escape us whether the things of which we are aware are present, or were present, or are not yet present*.*

This explains what it means to perceive that we perceive. It is neither a matter of noticing anything going on in myself, nor of observing some particular feature of what I perceive: there is nothing that perceiving “feels like,” and something’s *being perceived* is not there in it to be seen or heard or felt. (Aristotle is no forerunner of the British empiricists like Hume or Berkeley, who thought that we infer whether we are perceiving or remembering by taking notice of the relative “force and vivacity” of the objects of our awareness.)[[57]](#footnote-57) And yet to be aware that we are perceiving is still a matter of grasping something about the objects of our awareness: their *presence.* The awareness that things are present characterizes specifically *perceptual* awareness “from inside,” or from our own perspective, since we can also be aware of things not as *present,* but as *having once been present* or *not yet present*, as when we remember or anticipate. To perceive that we perceive, then, is simply to grasp the presenceof the objects of our awareness. This is why Aristotle can explain how we perceive that we perceive in *De Anima* 3.2 by pointing out that we are able to discern the presence of things.

One might object that “something’s presence” is not the same as “my perceiving it.” How, then, could I be aware of the latter in being aware of the former? That is, how could “perceiving that I perceive” be the same as “perceiving that something (whatever it is) is present?” Here, the surface differences between the formulae obscure the fact that they come to the same thing. If I am aware of something’s presence, I am aware of it as *here right now before me*, or *over there right now*, or something of the sort. And what is the difference between being aware that there is right now something here before me, and being aware that I am perceiving? What more could it mean to perceive that I perceive? If I am aware that *these things* (whatever they might be) *are here right now before me,* there is nothing else that I need to recognize in order to become aware that I am perceiving.

Of course, I might think to myself “There’s something right now here before me” without thinking at the very same moment “I’m perceiving it,” if to “think” either of these things just means to hear those very words in my head. But Aristotle never indicates that perceiving that we perceive is a matter of voicing some particular formula to ourselves. Indeed, he would need to positively deny it. Animals, too, perceive that they perceive, though they have no words in their heads. My awareness that I am perceiving, or that there are things before me here and now, is not a matter of saying anything to myself. As I walk down the street, my mind might wander over any topic whatsoever. No matter what I *think* about, I will nevertheless remain aware that I am in the midst of a great many things.This is not something that I have to recite constantly, or even say to myself a single time: it is, as it were, something that I *see.*

To perceive that I perceive, then, is to grasp the presence of the things that appear to me. But we should still wonder why Aristotle should discuss this phenomenon where he does. As we have seen, Aristotle’s discussion of perceiving that we perceive comes in the midst of a much larger discussion of the various perceptible features of perceptible things: their being, for instance, *red* or *spherical* or *falling* or *red and hot*. “Present” sits uncomfortably on this list. Whereas to say that something is red or spherical is just to make a statement about *it*, to say that it is present is just as much to say something about *ourselves*. “Present” must mean “present *to me*.” When I am aware of something’s presence, I am aware that it is *here* and *now*, and “here” and “now” are not like “red” or “spherical”: hereand noware where and when *I* am. This makes it difficult to understand why Aristotle turns his attention to the awareness of presence where he does, in the middle of discussing the various attributes of perceptible things as they are *independently* of the relation in which they stand to a perceiver.

III.

Here, it is helpful to notice a special fact about “presence.” If I am aware of something’s presence, then I am aware that it *is*, that it exists. And unlike “present,” “existent” describes things independently of any relation to me. Something’s existence is not similarly manifest in, say, its redness or sphericity. Of course, if I am aware that something *is red*, then I am aware that it *is*, or exists. But what does it mean to be aware that something isred? It is not just to be aware of its redness, since this does not distinguish the awareness that it *is* red from the awareness that it *was* red. To be aware that something *is* red is for its redness to appear as here and now. This means that the awareness of something’s presence is implicated in the awareness of its *being red*. (In the same way, my awareness that it *was* red depends on grasping it not as here and now, but as there and then.) Our awareness of something’s *being* or *existence* is far more intimately related to our awareness of its *presence* than to our awareness of its various observable attributes, like its redness or sphericity.

We might think that this connection should not be pushed too far. After all, are we not aware of the existence of many things which are *absent* from us? Although I am not looking at them right now, am I not aware that there are trees outside my window? In fact, Aristotle flatly denies this. This point is of clear importance to him: it is one of his frequent refrains. “Every object of sensation” (ἅπαν γὰρ αἰσθητὸν), he tells us, “when it passes outside the range of sensation, becomes obscured” (ἔξω γινόμενον τῆς αἰσθήσεως ἄδηλον γίνεται).[[58]](#footnote-58) This is because particular things always permit of being or not being—φθαρτὰ πάντα τὰ καθ᾽ἕκαστα[[59]](#footnote-59)—so that “it is unclear whether they have passed away, when they depart from our perception” (ἄδηλά τε γὰρ τὰ φθειρόμενα…ὅταν ἐκ τῆς αἰσθήσεως ἀπέλθῃ).[[60]](#footnote-60) Although I might hang on to beliefs about particular things (“σῳζομένων τῶν λόγων ἐν τῇ ψυχῇ”),[[61]](#footnote-61) like the belief that there are trees outside my window, these beliefs can become false if things change while they are not being perceived.[[62]](#footnote-62) So long as they are not being perceived, their *being* is obscured (ἄδηλον): ἀπελθόντες δὲ ἐκ τῆς ἐντελεχείας οὐ δῆλον πότερον εἰσὶν ἢ οὐκ εἰσίν.[[63]](#footnote-63) It “escapes us whether they *are* or not” (τὰ δ᾽ἐνδεχόμενα ἄλλως, ὅταν ἔξω τοῦ θεωρεῖν γένηται, λανθάνει εἰ ἔστιν ἢ μη).[[64]](#footnote-64)

So long as they are not being perceived, the trees outside my window are (for me) objects of memory and anticipation. That is, I remember that there *were* trees there, and I anticipate that there *will be* trees when I look again.[[65]](#footnote-65) But strictly speaking, I am aware that they *are* there only in perceiving them. In much the same way, I am aware that there *are not* trees outside only when I am looking, or that *there is nothing* in the closet only when I am feeling around. In short, the *being* or *not-being* of things is manifest to us in perception, and only in perception. This is not to say that their “essential nature” is disclosed in perception, but rather that they *are* at all, that they exist. That there isa tree at all, as opposed to not, is manifest, “δῆλον,” only in its being perceived.[[66]](#footnote-66)

A straightforward corollary of this claim is that our awareness of something’s *being* or *not-being* is always an awareness of its *presence* or *absence*. When I feel a coat in the closet, I do become aware “that there is a coat” (or “that something is there”). More precisely, though, I become aware of its presence *to me*, its being “here before me,” “in view,” “here at hand,” and so on. I am, after all, *perceiving* it. Similarly, my awareness of something’s *not-being* is always an awareness of absence *from me*—that it is not here, for instance, or over there. Of course, beingand not-beingare not the same as presence and absence: plenty of things exist which are not present to me, but absent. It is rather that our awareness of something’s being or not-being takes the form of an awareness of its presence or absence, or that being and not-being become *manifest* in presence and absence.

If this is what Aristotle has in mind, it is easy to see why we meet with this discussion where we do, at the beginning of *De Anima* 3.2. As I have already mentioned, many readers have seen in *De Anima* 3.1 and 3.2 a direct engagement with the picture of perception developed in Plato’s *Theaetetus*. On this account, perceptual awareness is limited to the grasp of what Aristotle calls the proper objects of sense, such as color, odor, or texture. We become aware of things like “being and not-being, likeness and unlikeness, same and different; also one, and any other number”[[67]](#footnote-67) only in rational reflection upon what is given to us in properly perceptual awareness.[[68]](#footnote-68) Although readers have often noted the striking overlap between this list of attributes and those discussed in *De Anima* 3.1 and 3.2, they seem to have assumed that the most important term that Socrates lists—“being,” or “that things *are*”—does not come up for consideration in these chapters.[[69]](#footnote-69) This is only natural, since it has escaped notice that our awareness that we are perceiving depends on a grasp of the *being* of the things we perceive. It should now be clear that perceiving that we perceive depends on discerning the presence of things, and also that to grasp something as present is to grasp it as *being*.

Aristotle illustrates this point by having us consider the awareness of light and darkness in order to help us see, contra *Plato*, that the awareness of something’s *being* is a *perceptual* phenomenon, or that we become aware of something’s *being* through the senses themselves. In this way, Aristotle drives home his frequently repeated assertion that the being of things is manifest in perception. He wants us to see that although our awareness of the light is not an awareness of colors, shapes, or sizes, it is nevertheless most assuredly a perceptual awareness. And this perceptual awareness demands to be understood as a grasp not of the particular perceptible characteristics of things, but of their very presence—that is, of their *being there*.

Seen this way, it is also easy to understand why Aristotle’s account of perceiving that we perceive is directly followed by a lengthy discussion intended to show that something’s *being* is not the same as its *being perceived.*[[70]](#footnote-70)(Here, too, the connection with the *Theaetetus* is obvious.) He argues against those earlier philosophers who had claimed that color and flavor, for instance, come to be and pass away simultaneously with perception, or *are* only insofar as they are perceived.[[71]](#footnote-71) The details of the argument are too subtle to dwell on here; it is enough to see that an attempt to distinguish *being* from *being perceived* follows immediately upon the claim—if the interpretation advanced in this essay is correct—that the being of things, that they *are,* is grasped in perception. Aristotle wants to make clear that although the being of particular things is discerned only in their being perceived, we cannot conclude from this that *esse est percipi.* It is rather that something’s being is *manifest,* “δῆλον,” only in its being perceived.

In *De Anima* 3.2, then, Aristotle sets out to show that being and not-being are discerned in perception, and also to explain how we perceive that we perceive. By now, it should be clear that these are not two separate topics. My awareness that I am perceiving is nothing other than the awareness that what appears to me, *is*, just as to be aware that I am remembering is to be aware that what appears, once *was*. This is an important lesson about Aristotle’s conception of self-consciousness. Still, it would get things backwards if we thought that Aristotle’s primary aim in *De Anima* 3.2 was to teach us how we know our own minds. It is probably better to say that he draws attention to our knowledge of our own minds in order to show us that a handle on *being* is implicit in even the simplest of our perceptual experiences.

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1. In *De Anima* 3.2, he speaks of “perceiving that we see and hear.” But elsewhere in the corpus, he says that “we perceive that we perceive,” where this is clearly just a general formula for the claim that we perceive that we see, hear, smell, taste, and feel (N.E. 1170a29-32).That is how I will use it in this essay. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. That is, on the so-called “proper objects of sense,” then on the “common sensibles,” and finally on “difference.” [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Especially Kosman 1975. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Most importantly, Kosman 1975 and Caston 2002. See also Ross 1961, Kahn 1966, Hamlyn 1968, Sorabji 1974, Hardie 1976, Modrak 1981a, Osborne 1983, Gregoric 2007, and Parälä 2019. Johansen 2006 partially dissents, but does not develop the thought. McCabe 2007 and Twomey 2019 resist these general tendencies to some extent, but take a different approach from the one to be defended here. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. See *Top.* 5.3, 131b21-22, *Metaph.* 1036a5-7, 1039b30-31, 1040a2-4, *E.N.* 1139b21-22. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. 425b12-13: ἐπεὶ δ᾽αισθανόμεθα ὅτι ὁρῶμεν καὶ ἀκούομεν, ἀνάγκη ἢ τῇ ὄψει αἰσθάνεσθαι ὅτι ὁρᾷ, ἢ ἑτέρᾳ. I take it that the feminine “ἑτέρᾳ” should be complemented by “αἴσθησει.” [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. See for instance Hicks 1907, p. 362; Kahn 2009 [1981], pp. 97-99.; McCabe 2007, p. 165ff.; Twomey 2019. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. That is, οὐσίαν…καὶ τὸ μὴ εἶναι, καὶ ὁμοιότητα καὶ ἀνομοιότητα, καὶ τὸ ταὐτόν τε καὶ ἕτερον, ἔτι δὲ ἕν τε καὶ τὸν ἄλλον ἀριθμόν. *Theaetetus* 185c-d. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. *Theaetetus* 184-186. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. D.A. 425a15-16, cf. 418a17-18. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. For ease of exposition, I skip over the corollary of Aristotle’s opening remark at 425b13-15, that whether it is by sight or by some other sense that we perceive that we see, the same sense will be of sight and of the color that one sees (ἀλλ᾽ἡ αὐτὴ ἔσται τῆς ὄψεως καὶ τοῦ ὑποκειμένου χρώματος), so that either two senses will be of the same thing or sight will be of itself (ὥστε ἢ δύο τοῦ αὐτοῦ ἔσονται ἢ αὐτὴ αὑτῆς). See Johansen 2006, p. 243. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. D.A. 425b15-17: ἔτι δ᾽εἰ καὶ ἑτέρα εἴη ἡ τῆς ὄψεως αἴσθησις, ἢ εἰς ἄπειρον εἶσιν ἢ αὐτή τις ἔσται αὑτῆς. ὥστ᾽ἐπὶ τῆς πρώτης τοῦτο ποιητέον. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. Kosman 2006, pp. 280-81, makes this point forcefully against Johansen 2006. Only later in this essay will it become clear why he can take this for granted. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. 437a27-28: μὴ ἔστι λανθάνειν αἰσθανόμενον καὶ ὁρῶντα ὁρώμενόν τι. (Rejecting Ross’s addition of μὴ after λανθάνειν, which yields the absurd claim that it is impossible to be unaware of *not* perceiving. Is someone in a deep sleep aware that he is not perceiving anything?) In fact this statement is the antecedent of a conditional, but the context makes clear that Aristotle endorses it. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. E.N. 1170a29: ὁ δ᾽ὁρῶν ὅτι ὁρᾷ αἰσθάνεται καὶ ὁ ἀκούων ὅτι ἀκούει. See also Phys. 244b15-245a1: τὸ δ᾽ [sc. ἔμψυχον] οὐ λανθάνει πάσχον [sc. κατὰ τὰς αἰσθήσεις]. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. Aristotle’s regress argument is often taken to target the possibility of an “inner sense,” or a “higher order” sense monitoring the deliverances of the five senses. See for instance Kosman 1975, pp. 511-12; Caston 2002, p. 776ff. But Aristotle gives no indication that there would be anything particularly special about this additional sense: he simply calls it “another” sense. This is for the best, since the regress depends on the claim that whenever a given sense is active, we perceive the activity of that sense. Inner sense theorists simply deny that there is any need for an even higher order sense to monitor the activity of the inner sense. If Aristotle thought this denial was unreasonable, he would need to give some reason to think so. We meet with no such argument in the *De Anima* or elsewhere. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. Like most readers, I am not troubled by Aristotle’s claim at *De Somno* 455a12-20 that “it is not by sight that one sees that he sees” (οὐ γὰρ δὴ τῇ γε ὄψει ὁρᾷ ὅτι ὁρᾷ) but rather by “a certain common capacity accompanying all the senses” (τις…κοινὴ δύναμις ἀκολουθοῦσα πάσαις). All Aristotle means is that if “seeing” is taken in a strict sense, such that it is only of color, then one cannot be said to perceive that he sees *by sight*. In *De Anima* 3.2, by contrast, he urges us to think of “seeing” in a broader sense— see below. [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. 425b17. [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. 425b17-20: εἰ γὰρ τὸ τῇ ὄψει αἰσθάνεσθαί ἐστιν ὁρᾶν, ὁρᾶται δὲ χρῶμα ἢ τὸ ἔχον, εἰ ὄψεταί τις τὸ ὁρῶν, καὶ χρῶμα ἕξει τὸ ὁρῶν πρῶτον. I follow Ross’s 1961 text over his 1956. [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
20. 425b20: φανερὸν τοίνυν ὅτι οὐχ ἓν τὸ τῇ ὄψει αἰσθάνεσθαι. [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
21. 425b20-22: καὶ γὰρ ὅταν μὴ ὁρῶμεν, τῇ ὄψει κρίνομεν καὶ τὸ σκότος καὶ τὸ φῶς, ἀλλ᾽οὐχ ὡσαύτως. [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
22. 425b22-23: ἔτι δὲ καὶ τὸ ὁρῶν ἔστιν ὥς κεχρωμάτισται. [↑](#footnote-ref-22)
23. 425b23-24: τὸ γὰρ αἰσθητήριον δεκτικὸν τοῦ αἰσθητοῦ ἄνευ τῆς ὕλης ἕκαστον. [↑](#footnote-ref-23)
24. 425b24-25: διὸ καὶ ἀπελθόντων τῶν αἰσθητῶν ἔνεισιν αἰσθήσεις καὶ φαντασίαι ἐν τοῖς αἰσθητηρίοις. [↑](#footnote-ref-24)
25. 425a26-27: ἡ δὲ τοῦ αἰσθητοῦ ἐνέργεια καὶ τῆς αἰσθήσεως ἡ αὐτὴ μέν ἐστι καὶ μία, τὸ δ᾽εἶναι οὐ τὸ αὐτὸ αὐταῖς. [↑](#footnote-ref-25)
26. E.g. Modrak 1981a, Osborne 1983, Corkum 2010. [↑](#footnote-ref-26)
27. Kosman 1975, p. 515. See also Kosman 2012. [↑](#footnote-ref-27)
28. *De Mem.* 449b22-23, 450a19-21. See Part III below for discussion. [↑](#footnote-ref-28)
29. I agree with Caston 2002, pp. 783-85, then, that Kosman is guilty of a fallacy in identifying my awareness of, e.g., green with my awareness of “the actuality of green,” or the green thing’s being perceived. Caston himself is more focused on a different fallacy of which he accuses Kosman, that to be aware of the actuality of green is not to be aware of the actuality of seeing, since although the two are “one in number” they are “different in being.” Here, I think that Caston is insisting on a distinction without a difference. “The actuality of green” is, in this context, just “green’s being seen,” and it is hard to see how I could be aware of “seeing green” without being aware of “green’s being seen.” [↑](#footnote-ref-29)
30. See *De Anima* 2.12, 424a17ff. [↑](#footnote-ref-30)
31. Ross 1961, note *ad loc.*; Shields 2016, note *ad loc.* [↑](#footnote-ref-31)
32. For instance Hicks 1907, p. 434. [↑](#footnote-ref-32)
33. Themistius 1899, 83.24-26. Simplicius 1882, 189.17-19. Johansen 2006, pp. 249-50, and Gregoric 2007, p. 184, notice the same thing. [↑](#footnote-ref-33)
34. Themistius 1899, 83.24-26: ᾗ τοίνυν αἰσθήσει αἰσθανόμεθα ὅτι οὐχ ὁρῶμεν, τῇ αὐτῇ ταύτῃ αἰσθήσει αἰσθανόμεθα καὶ ὅτι ὁρῶμεν, αὕτη δὲ ἔσται ἡ ὄψις. [↑](#footnote-ref-34)
35. D.A. 418b9-10. [↑](#footnote-ref-35)
36. D.A. 418b3-6. [↑](#footnote-ref-36)
37. If it *is appearing*, it is appearing *now*; and if not *here*, where? [↑](#footnote-ref-37)
38. For this reasoning, see *De Memoria* 450a25ff., 450b11ff. Also Part III, below. [↑](#footnote-ref-38)
39. Cf. McCabe 2007, pp. 160-61. [↑](#footnote-ref-39)
40. Cf. E.N. 1170a30-31. [↑](#footnote-ref-40)
41. More precisely, that nothing can be seen *right now*. Once it is light, things will be different. [↑](#footnote-ref-41)
42. Something is not actually visible unless it is illuminated. In the darkness, things are not visible *sensu stricto* because a condition on their being actually seen is not fulfilled—they are not illuminated. In a looser sense, they are, of course, visible: they are the kinds of things that, in appropriate circumstances, can be seen. Cf. *D.A.* 430a14-17. [↑](#footnote-ref-42)
43. 425a17-19. [↑](#footnote-ref-43)
44. *D.A.* 2.9 421b3-8, 2.10 422a20ff., 2.11 424a10-15. [↑](#footnote-ref-44)
45. For this reasoning, see *D.A.* 426b14-15. [↑](#footnote-ref-45)
46. *De Mem.* 449b9-15. [↑](#footnote-ref-46)
47. *De Mem.* 449b22-23. [↑](#footnote-ref-47)
48. *De Mem.* 450a19-21. [↑](#footnote-ref-48)
49. *De Mem*. 449b28. [↑](#footnote-ref-49)
50. *De Mem*. 449b28-30: “only those animals which are aware of time are capable of remembering” (ὅσα χρόνου αἰσθάνεται, ταῦτα μόνα τῶν ζῴων μνημονεύει). Although animals cannot literally “say in the soul” that they formerly perceived whatever it is that they remember, Aristotle must think that they do something analogous. [↑](#footnote-ref-50)
51. D.A. 426b14. [↑](#footnote-ref-51)
52. D.A. 426b26-27. [↑](#footnote-ref-52)
53. D.A. 426b27-28. [↑](#footnote-ref-53)
54. D.A. 426b28. Compare perceiving “that it is now” (ὅτι νῦν) in this passage with perceiving “that it was earlier” (ὅτι πρότερον) at *De Mem.* 450a19-21. [↑](#footnote-ref-54)
55. 452b27. [↑](#footnote-ref-55)
56. *De Sensu* 437a27-28. See note 12 above. [↑](#footnote-ref-56)
57. Hume, *A Treatise of Human Nature,* 1.3.5. Berkeley, *Principles of Human Knowledge,* Pt. 1, §§30, 33, 36. Although Aristotle does in his *Rhetoric* call the faculty of imagination (φαντασία), which is responsible, among other things, for memory, “a sort of weak perception” (αἴσθησίς τις ἀσθενής*,* 1370a28-29), he in no way suggests that this is a criterion for determining whether we are remembering or perceiving. [↑](#footnote-ref-57)
58. *Top.* 5.3, 131b21-22. [↑](#footnote-ref-58)
59. *Metaph*. 1039b30-31. [↑](#footnote-ref-59)
60. *Metaph*. 1040a2-4. [↑](#footnote-ref-60)
61. *Metaph*. 1040a4. [↑](#footnote-ref-61)
62. Cf. *Metaph*. 1051b13-15: περὶ μὲν οὖν τὰ ἐνδεχόμενα ἡ αὐτὴ γίγνεται ψευδὴς καὶ ἀληθὴς δόξα καὶ ὁ λόγος ὁ αὐτός, καὶ ἐνδέχεται ὁτὲ μὲν ἀληθεύειν ὁτὲ δὲ ψεύδεσθαι. [↑](#footnote-ref-62)
63. *Metaph*. 1036a5-7. [↑](#footnote-ref-63)
64. *E.N.* 1139b21-22. [↑](#footnote-ref-64)
65. See below. [↑](#footnote-ref-65)
66. For a thoughtful discussion of these passages, see Mansion 1946, esp. pp. 116, 216. I leave open whether this is one of the senses of “being” that Aristotle names in the *Metaphysics*—I take it that this is at least a recognizable use of the verb *einai* in Aristotle’s writing. Thus Owen 1965, *passim*, but esp. pp. 84-87, 92-93; and Kahn 2009 [1966], p. 40. [↑](#footnote-ref-66)
67. That is, οὐσίαν…καὶ τὸ μὴ εἶναι, καὶ ὁμοιότητα καὶ ἀνομοιότητα, καὶ τὸ ταὐτόν τε καὶ ἕτερον, ἔτι δὲ ἕν τε καὶ τὸν ἄλλον ἀριθμόν. *Theaetetus* 185c-d. [↑](#footnote-ref-67)
68. *Theaetetus* 186b-d. [↑](#footnote-ref-68)
69. *Theaetetus* 186b. It is a matter of some controversy how exactly to understand Plato’s uses of “*ousia*” and the verb “*einai*” in this passage. Kahn 2009 [1981], pp. 96-106, argues persuasively that “being,” in this passage, incorporates both an “existential” and a “predicative” sense, or the notions of *there being a certain something*, and *its being thus and so*. Burnyeat 1976 is close to Kahn. For plausible alternative readings that are incompatible with the general thrust of this essay, see Cooper 1970 and Modrak 1981. [↑](#footnote-ref-69)
70. D.A. 425b26-26a26. [↑](#footnote-ref-70)
71. DA. 426a20: “The earlier natural philosophers were mistaken in their view that without sight there was no white or black, without taste no flavor” (οἱ πρότερον φυσιολόγοι τοῦτο οὐ καλῶς ἔλεγον, οὐθὲν οἰόμενοι οὔτε λευκὸν οὔτε μέλαν εἶναι ἄνευ ὄψεως, οὐδὲ χυμὸν ἄνευ γεύσεως). [↑](#footnote-ref-71)