

**THE LIMITS OF SENSORY
KNOWLEDGE: DISCUSSING THE
ANONYMOUS ARTS MASTER'S
VIEWS ON ARISTOTLE'S DE
ANIMA**

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The reliability of sensory knowledge, and whether perception accurately reflects the external world, is a perennial philosophical problem. This essay examines the Anonymous Arts Master's text, "Questions on De Anima I-II," a work dated to approximately 1270, the analysis focuses primarily on the second book and the 17th question posed by the author: "How does sense know that the object sensed has a different being from its being that is conjoined to sense?" (76) In posing this, the Anonymous Arts Master addresses a fundamental epistemological issue: the distinction between external reality and its mental representation. He questions whether we can know if the external world truly differs from the way it appears in our minds, and whether we can trust the senses, which mediate our perception of that world. The author addresses a significant issue within epistemology; the branch of philosophy concerned with the nature and acquisition of knowledge. This essay will first outline the problem, then provide relevant historical context for the author's position, and finally, critically discuss the question within its historical and philosophical framework.

The question of the extent to which humans can trust their senses and perceptions is a foundational philosophical inquiry that persists to this day. Its contemporary relevance is highlighted by phenomena such as virtual reality, deepfakes, cognitive biases, and mass media manipulation. The problem's persistence is largely due to the inherent difficulty of achieving an objective standpoint outside of one's own subjective consciousness. This consciousness is entirely dependent on sensory input for its information about the external world. While experiments involving sensory deprivation are common in psychology, they cannot provide a comprehensive understanding of this epistemological dilemma. Given that humans share a common sensory apparatus, it remains empirically unprovable whether individual perceptions of phenomena, such as colour, are uniform. This uncertainty extends to radical sceptical scenarios, including thought experiments concerning simulated realities, as popularized by films like *The Matrix* (Lana Wachowski & Lilly Wachowski, 1999).

In approximately 350 B.C., the Greek philosopher Aristotle composed one of his foundational works, *De Anima*, a text to which the Anonymous Arts Master would refer over 1500 years later. In this treatise, Aristotle argued for the unity of the soul, positing that it is not a mere collection of independent faculties, but a unified principle informed by data from the five external senses: sight, hearing, touch, taste, and smell. Aristotle correlated each of these senses with a specific sensory organ (for example, the ear and hearing). Moreover, he addressed how the senses distinguish between the external object and the sensory faculty itself, particularly in Book II. He contended that the soul has a prominent role in synthesizing the information provided by the senses to construct a perception of the surrounding world. However, Aristotle also acknowledged that the senses are fallible and subject to error. For example, Aristotle (422a-422b):

Hence it is by the faculty of sense-perception, and not by the faculty of thought, that we perceive that the special object of each sense is one. And it is evident that the sense in question is not mistaken about what is proper to it, e.g., sight is not mistaken about color, nor hearing about sound, and so with the others. But this happens only under normal conditions; if the sense-organ is in an abnormal condition, it may judge incorrectly, as when the tongue is fevered and things taste bitter, or the eye is jaundiced and everything appears yellow.

Furthermore, in 422b:

...if two properties are presented simultaneously, and only one is really being perceived, we may be misled; for instance, yellow and bitter are both properties of bile, and it may appear that all yellow things are bitter.

In these passages, Aristotle suggests that it is the senses that can be deceived. In his view, the soul itself is not the source of error; rather, errors arise when the soul processes faulty information derived from the senses, imagination, or memory. This implies that, for Aristotle, a cautious and reflective approach to sensory input is necessary. While the senses are our sole source of information about the world, he advocates for critical engagement with the data they provide.

The Anonymous Arts Master composed his text in the thirteenth century, a period of significant intellectual revival in Europe characterized by the rediscovery and study of classical texts. The work itself examines several facets of Aristotle's *De Anima* and is believed to be a collection of unedited notes from lectures on the subject (Pasnau and Stump). Pasnau and Stump (2002) posit that the author may have been Siger of Brabant, a prominent figure at the University of Paris and a proponent of radical Aristotelianism. This era was marked by the flourishing of universities and the philosophical movement of Scholasticism, which sought to synthesize classical philosophy with Christian theology (Haskins 2017). Concurrently, the translation of numerous philosophical works from Arabic into Latin, along with their associated commentaries, provided new interpretive frameworks and intellectual stimuli for scholars of the time (Ivry 2001).

The Anonymous Arts Master initiates his argument by framing the central problem of perception:

Sensible things have their actual sensed being in the senses, so that their actual sensed being is the being of the senses, and conversely. But the being of those sensible outside the senses is not their sensed being. There is a question, then, of how the senses know that the object sensed has a different being from its being that is conjoined to sense. In what way

does it know that it has a being different from a sensed being, a being under which it is not in the senses? (76)

Here, he articulates the epistemological challenge: given that our access to the world is mediated entirely by the senses, how can we ascertain that an external object possesses a being independent of our perception of it? However, after establishing this uncertainty, he argues forcefully against scepticism and asserts the necessity of absolute trust in the senses. He contends that to doubt the veracity of sensory information is tantamount to intellectual nihilism, the belief that knowledge and truth are illusions, and therefore nothing can be known with certainty: "To the question, then, I say that someone who doubts how he knows that an object of sense has a being other than what appears does not believe that the senses are true per se of their sense objects. And I say that anyone who denies this knows nothing for himself" (77). Citing Aristotle's *Physics* II, he further claims that an individual incapable of distinguishing between what is self-evidently known and what is not "could never do philosophy" (77). This position is notably radical because it stringently dismisses any argument against sensory reliability, equating such a challenge with a complete failure of knowledge.

This radical viewpoint exhibits several points of tension, particularly when contrasted with Aristotle's own more nuanced position. Aristotle himself acknowledged that phenomena such as hallucinations, illusions, and other sensory errors could occur, indicating that the sensory system is fallible and that its inputs require careful reflection by the soul. The Anonymous Arts Master, however, does not engage with this aspect of Aristotle's thought. Instead, he argues from the foundational premise of perceptual certainty, the belief that the senses provide a direct and incorrigible form of knowledge that, in his view, requires no further justification.

Admittedly, a baseline level of trust in the senses is pragmatically necessary, as they constitute our only source of empirical information. However, this functional trust must be qualified by a critical awareness of the potential for systemic bias and error. The Anonymous Master's line of argumentation proves inadequate when confronted with phenomena such as simple optical illusions like the phenomenon of a mirage, where distant objects appear displaced or distorted due to atmospheric conditions. Sometimes the trick is subtle: a colour appears to change, not by altering itself, but by standing among other colours that make it seem transformed. Additionally, there is the illusion of size-contrast, where identical objects appear to be different sizes when placed against larger or smaller surrounding objects. These examples illustrate how the senses can be misled or manipulated by external conditions.

Consequently, the proposition that the senses should be regarded as absolute and beyond critique is untenable. Such a position would preclude necessary reflection on their fallibility. The catalogue of identified cognitive biases continues to expand with advances in cognitive science, underscoring the ubiquity of perceptual errors, many of which were known to medieval scholars. To insist on foundational axioms that cannot be challenged is problematic, as it contravenes the fundamental philosophical principle of critical inquiry.

Therefore, a more nuanced perspective than that offered by the Anonymous Arts Master is required to approach this enduring problem. This perspective must acknowledge that the senses are subject to numerous biases that influence perception and cognition. Without such acknowledgment, one risks perpetuating errors in judgment. A critical, rather than absolute, trust in our senses is essential for sound epistemological practice.

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