



Seminar

MIKA PERÄLÄ

Erik Allardt Fellow, SCAS.
Alfred Kordelin Fellow, University of Helsinki

Aristotle on Perceptual Discrimination

Tuesday, 28 November, 11:15 a.m.

In the Thunberg Lecture Hall
SCAS, Linneanum, Thunbergsvägen 2, Uppsala
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S W E D I S H
C O L L E G I U M
for ADVANCED STUDY

ABOUT MIKA PERÄLÄ

Mika Perälä has studied classics and philosophy at the University of Helsinki. After earning his doctorate in Theoretical Philosophy in 2010, he pursued his postdoctoral studies at Oriel College, University of Oxford, in 2010–11 and worked as a postdoctoral researcher at the Academy of Finland's Centre of Excellence in Philosophical Psychology, Morality and Politics in 2011–12. He held an Academy of Finland Postdoctoral Fellowship in 2012–15 and is currently an Alfred Kordelin Fellow at the University of Helsinki.

Perälä's principal research interests are in ancient philosophy, especially Aristotle's philosophy of nature, psychology, ethics, and scientific methodology. Among his most recent journal papers are 'A Friend Being Good and One's Own in *Nicomachean Ethics* 9.9', *Phronesis* 61.3 (2016), and 'Aristotle on Singular Thought', *Journal of the History of Philosophy* 53.3 (2015). He is a contributor to the *Sourcebook for the History of the Philosophy of Mind: Philosophical Psychology from Plato to Kant*, eds. Simo Knuuttila and Juha Sihvola (Springer, 2014), and is currently editing (with Sonja Schierbaum) a special issue entitled 'Negative Judgement: Ancient, Medieval, and Modern Perspectives' for *Topoi: An International Review of Philosophy*.

During his stay at SCAS, Perälä will continue his work on Aristotelian philosophy, with a special focus on the first principles of health and disease.

ABSTRACT

In the *de Anima* Aristotle holds that we can perceive ordinary objects and discriminate their different features in virtue of the senses rather than the reasoning capacity. He says, for instance, that the sense of sight and the sense of taste can concern the same object, say bile, and discriminate its being yellow from its being bitter (*de An.* 425b1–2). However, it is not clear how he limits the scope of a single sense. The received interpretation that goes back to Thomas Aquinas and even further to Alexander of Aphrodisias consists in two claims: first, that Aristotle defines a single sense by reference to its ability to perceive the sensible properties that are proper to that sense, colour for sight, sound for hearing, and so forth, and second, that he explains perceptions of unities of these items, and differences between them by reference to a further, higher-order capacity that the senses share with each other, and which is called the 'common sense'. But I argue that this interpretation is problematic. It is problematic because, among other things, it judges Aristotle incapable of explaining how we can perceive contrary sensible properties such as white and black at a time. On the alternative interpretation that I propose, Aristotle defines the sense by reference to its ability to discern the differences between its proper items. That is why, I argue, he refers to each single sense as a capacity for discriminating (*to kritikon*), which implies that he regards discrimination as the basic function of each sense. The aim of the paper is thus to show that Aristotle's theory of sense perception is basically a theory of perceptual discrimination.