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# Self-knowledge and self-reversion of the irrational soul in ‘Simplicius’, Commentary on *On the Soul*

Chiara Militello

The subject of this paper is the theory of self-knowledge in the commentary on Aristotle’s *On the Soul*, traditionally attributed to Simplicius.<sup>1</sup> Indeed, there is a debate about the identity of the author of this commentary. Even though the work is attributed to Simplicius in all the manuscripts, this attribution was disputed at the beginning of the seventeenth century by Francesco Piccolomini and, more recently, by Fernand Bossier and Carlos Steel.<sup>2</sup> These scholars doubted the traditional attribution because the way in which the author expresses himself is different from the style we find in the other commentaries attributed to Simplicius. Bossier and Steel also noticed several doctrinal discrepancies. For example, Steel highlighted that references to Iamblichus are frequent in the commentary but not in Simplicius’ works. While several scholars have found Bossier and Steel’s arguments to be conclusive or, at least, convincing—among them one can cite Henry Blumenthal, James Opie Urmson, Peter Lautner, John Finamore, John Dillon and Matthias Perkams<sup>3</sup>—other experts—including Ilsetraut Hadot<sup>4</sup>—disagree. Bossier and Steel also proposed a new author for the commentary on *On the Soul* because they thought that several hints lead to acknowledging Priscian of Lydia as the philosopher behind the work. For example, Bossier and Steel argued that when the commentator refers to an epitome of his of Theophrastus’ *Physics*, the cited work is Priscian’s *Metaphrase* of Theophrastus. This thesis has been received with less enthusiasm as few scholars have accepted it and Hadot has argued against it. Since I

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<sup>1</sup> I thank Professor Loredana Cardullo for her ever thoughtful advice and the anonymous referee for the helpful suggestions and questions. I also thank the English Proofread service for suggesting changes to some words and phrases.

<sup>2</sup> Piccolomineus (1602) 216r-v. Bossier and Steel (1972). Steel (1978) *passim*. ‘Simplicius’ (1997) 105-140.

<sup>3</sup> Blumenthal (1982). Id. (1996) 65-71. Id. (1997) 213-214. ‘Simplicius’ (2000) 1-7. Simplicius (1995) 2-10. Iamblichus (2002) 18-24. Perkams (2005). Id. (2008) 150-153.

<sup>4</sup> Hadot (1978) 193-202. Ead. (1987) 23-24. Ead. (2002).

do not want to take sides in this debate, I will call this author ‘Simplicius’, using scare quotes. However, even when one does not identify the author of the commentary, one can say that he was probably a member of the Neoplatonic school of Athens when Damascius was the scholarch. As a matter of fact, this is true of both Simplicius and Priscian and, in any case, several aspects of the commentary are typical of the late school of Athens.

### I. Three kinds of self-knowledge

‘Simplicius’ describes three kinds of self-knowledge, linked, respectively, to the sensitive soul, to the rational soul and to the intellect.<sup>5</sup> Intellect is one with its objects, so when it knows them, it knows itself at the same time: every act of cognition of the intellect is an act of self-knowledge. This not only applies to the intellects that are above the soul (that is, the one that is participated by the soul and the one that cannot be participated) but also to the intellect that is part of the soul.<sup>6</sup> Reason also knows itself because knowing rationally means telling what is good from what is bad and what is true from what is false and such judgments could not happen if reason was unable to focus on its own deliberations and statements—that is, on its own activity.<sup>7</sup> Finally, ‘Simplicius’ states that sense perception in human beings is always accompanied by the awareness that one is perceiving—an awareness that belongs to sense itself, that is, to the common sense and to the special senses.<sup>8</sup> The commentator states that humans’ sense can perceive that it is perceiving.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Simp. [?] *in de An.* (ed. Hayduck) 1.1.7,17–27; 3.1.172,20–173,7. On self-knowledge in the commentary on *On the Soul*, traditionally attributed to Simplicius, see Perkams (2008) and Militello (2013). Of course, self-knowledge is a very important theme in the commentary of ‘Simplicius’ and in the works of the Neoplatonists generally. As Proclus put it, not knowing oneself is the biggest evil for a Neoplatonic philosopher (Procl. *in Alc.* 17,3–4). In the following review of the views of ‘Simplicius’ on self-knowledge, I mention some of the passages that I have already discussed in Militello (2013). However, here I highlight some traits of the commentator’s theory that I had not stressed there.

<sup>6</sup> Simp. [?] *in de An.* 3.3.210,11–211,15.

<sup>7</sup> Simp. [?] *in de An.* 3.3.204,24–205,14; 210,11–211,15.

<sup>8</sup> Simp. [?] *in de An.* 2.9.150,35–151,37; 3.1.172,11–173,7; 3.2.187,15–189,28; 3.3.204,24–205,14.

<sup>9</sup> Simp. [?] *in de An.* 3.2.187,27–28; 31–32; 188,39–40; 189,13–28; 32–33; 9.290,4–5; 6–8.

The idea that there are three different kinds of self-knowledge and, more precisely, that it is not by the means of a single faculty that one is aware of all its non-intellectual psychological activities, seemingly sets ‘Simplicius’ apart from previous Neoplatonists. As a matter of fact, as I have pointed out elsewhere, when Neoplatonic philosophers research the problem of the knowledge that human beings have of the non-intellectual activities of their own soul (or, in some cases, even of intellectual activities), they usually reach the conclusion that such knowledge pertains to a single faculty.<sup>10</sup> However, there is a possible exception to this general pattern because, according to Ilsetraut Hadot, Damascius ascribed the awareness that one is perceiving to common sense, while knowledge of the other psychological activities was provided by the attentive faculty.<sup>11</sup> Although, given the texts that are available to us, it is not possible to reach definitive conclusions, I think that Damascius envisaged a single faculty as providing us with self-knowledge of every part of the soul below the intellect.

The *locus classicus* for Damascius’ theory of self-knowledge is the following passage of his commentary on Plato’s *Phaedo*:

Dam. in *Phd.* (ed. Westerink) 1.271,1–3

What is that which recollects that it is recollecting? – It is a faculty by itself besides all the others, which always acts as a

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<sup>10</sup> Militello (2013) 56–66.

<sup>11</sup> Another possible exception is Plutarch of Athens, who ascribed the awareness that we are perceiving to either opinion (according to the “newer interpreters” mentioned by pseudo-Philoponus: Pseudo-Phlp. in *de An.* [ed. Hayduck] 3.2.464,30–32; 465,17–18) or common sense (according to pseudo-Philoponus himself: *ibid.* 3.2.465,22–26). As a matter of fact, it seems that in both cases the power that makes us aware of our perception cannot be responsible for higher forms of self-knowledge. The “newer interpreters” mentioned by pseudo-Philoponus argue that opinion cannot know the activities of more powerful faculties, such as discursive reason (*ibid.* 3.2.18–22), and the same argument can be applied, *a fortiori*, to common sense. Thus, one may deduce that Plutarch introduced at least two different faculties—i.e. opinion (or common sense) and a higher faculty—to explain that we are aware of our psychological activity. However, a Neoplatonist could accept that a lower faculty is aware of the activities of a higher faculty: for example, Plotinus stated that imagination is aware of thoughts (Plot. 4.3.30,5–16). Thus, we cannot be certain that Plutarch did not think that we are aware of all psychological activities as a result of opinion. Generally, since we have no evidence of Plutarch’s views on any form of self-awareness other than the one regarding perception, I think it would be pointless to speculate about his general theory of self-knowledge.

kind of witness to some one of the others, as conscience [συνειδός] to the appetitive faculties [ταῖς ὀρεκτικαῖς], as attention [προσεκτικόν] to the cognitive ones [ταῖς γνωστικαῖς].  
(tr. Westerink)

From this passage, it appears that Damascius ascribes the awareness of all psychological activities to a single faculty, which has a different character (*syneidos* or *prosektikon*) depending on whether it pays attention to processes that are related to appetites or to cognition. On the basis of this passage, several scholars have stated that, for Damascius, there is only one faculty responsible for all self-knowledge, including the awareness of one's own perception. For example, Peter Lautner thinks that, according to Damascius, it is the attentive part of the soul that is aware of the fact that the senses are active<sup>12</sup> and, according to Sarah Rappe, Damascius' *prosektikon* overlooks all the other faculties.<sup>13</sup> However, Hadot argues that Damascius distinguished two different kinds of self-knowledge because, while the *prosektikon* knows of some activities of the soul, the acts of perception are cognized by common sense.<sup>14</sup> The main reason that Hadot concludes that Damascius attributed the awareness of perception to common sense is that, if in supporting such an attribution 'Simplicius' (who, according to Hadot, is Simplicius) broke away from Damascius, he would have said so as he always does in such cases. Since 'Simplicius' does not say that he is parting from his master's opinion, he is not parting.<sup>15</sup> More generally, in the writings of Damascius' pupils, we find the main elements of his theory plus common sense.<sup>16</sup> Thus, according to Hadot, it is likely that common sense was part of the picture for Damascius, too. Of course, Damascius does not talk about common sense in the passage I have cited but, according to Hadot, the reason for this is simply that, here, the philosopher was not presenting a general theory of self-knowledge but, rather, merely explaining how we are aware that we are remembering something. Since memory is a faculty of the rational soul, Damascius did not have to provide details about how we know

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<sup>12</sup> Lautner (1994) 10.

<sup>13</sup> Damascius (2010) 33. Ahbel-Rappe (2010) 154.

<sup>14</sup> Hadot (1997) 76.

<sup>15</sup> Hadot (1997) 76-77.

<sup>16</sup> Hadot (1997) 76.

the activities of the irrational soul.<sup>17</sup> On the basis of her interpretation, Hadot thinks that when Damascius talks about *gnostikai dynameis*, one should translate the phrase as “facultés de la connaissance”, not as “facultés cognitives”, since these powers do not include sense perception.<sup>18</sup>

However, it is possible to raise some objections to Hadot’s arguments. First, Hadot argues that the author of the commentary on Aristotle’s *On the Soul* would have stressed any disagreement with Damascius because this is what Simplicius usually does. However, it is not certain that Simplicius wrote the commentary on *On the Soul*; indeed, that is a highly controversial thesis. In any case, even if one accepts Hadot’s hypothesis about the authorship of the commentary, it does not follow that Simplicius would highlight his parting from Damascius on the subject of the faculty that knows that we are perceiving. As a matter of fact, the commentator took the idea that sense knows itself from the text he was commenting on,<sup>19</sup> so he did not need to emphasize that it was not something that his master had taught him. It is not by chance that in order to support her statement that it is usual for Simplicius to mark when he is at odds with Damascius, Hadot cites the *Corollaries on Place and Time* from the commentary on *Physics*,<sup>20</sup> i.e. passages in which Simplicius is not directly commenting on Aristotle but, instead, is surveying the theories of all philosophers. In texts such as the *Corollaries*, it makes sense for Simplicius to stress the difference between his position and that of Damascius because there he considers the solutions that all philosophers, including his master, have given to a certain problem. However, when directly commenting on a statement by Aristotle, Simplicius’ task would be not to show where Damascius diverged from the Stagirite but, rather, to integrate the Aristotelian theories into a Neoplatonic framework—which is exactly what ‘Simplicius’ does when he deals with Aristotle’s assertions about perceptual self-knowledge. The same points can be used to counter Hadot’s argument that if two pupils of Damascius (i.e. Simplicius and Priscian) share the same idea that sense knows itself, this idea was surely taught to them by their master. As a matter of fact, here, too, one can note that we are

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<sup>17</sup> Hadot (1997) 75-76.

<sup>18</sup> Hadot (1997) 74-75.

<sup>19</sup> Arist. *de An.* (ed. Ross) 3.2.425b,12-25.

<sup>20</sup> Hadot (1997) 76 n. 113.

not at all sure that the author of the commentary on Aristotle's *On the Soul* is Simplicius. He may even be Priscian or he may be a Neoplatonic philosopher who was not a disciple of Damascius and, in both cases, there would be only one pupil of Damascius stating that we know that we are perceiving thanks to sense itself. However, once again, one does not have to dismiss Hadot's thesis on the authorship of the commentary in order to challenge her argument. Let us assume that Hadot is correct and the commentary on Aristotle's *On the Soul* was written by Simplicius—this would still not be enough to conclude that Damascius assigned perceptual awareness to sense. Indeed, the common source for both Simplicius (again, assuming he is the author of the commentary on Aristotle's *On the Soul*) and Priscian may easily be Aristotle rather than Damascius. The thesis that we know that we are perceiving thanks to common sense was stated by Aristotle in his *On Sleep*<sup>21</sup> and—as we know from Priscian—repeated by Theophrastus in his *On the Soul*.<sup>22</sup> When Priscian and the author of the commentary on Aristotle's *On the Soul* mention this thesis, they are very likely to be following Aristotle and his pupil. Priscian explicitly adheres to Theophrastus' opinion<sup>23</sup> and the author of the commentary on Aristotle's *On the Soul* is probably inspired by *On Sleep*, a work that he cites elsewhere.<sup>24</sup> There is no reason to suppose that Damascius inspired the two philosophers on this subject.

Finally, Hadot argues that in the cited passage of the *In Phaedonem*, Damascius only says that the *prosektikon* watches over the rational faculties of knowledge, which do not include sense perception. However, there is no reason to think that sense is not one of the *gnōstikāi dynamēis* that Damascius talks about. For example, in the commentary on the *Phaedo*, Damascius says that sense perception (*aisthēsis*) is the darkest kind of *gnōsis*<sup>25</sup> and then refers to that *gnōsis* that comes from sense perception.<sup>26</sup> Moreover, in the *Difficulties and Solutions of First Principles*, Damascius says that the irrational soul is both sensitive (*aisthētikē*) and desiderative and that, while the latter

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<sup>21</sup> Arist. *Somn. Vig.* (ed. Ross) 455a,13–22.

<sup>22</sup> Prisc. Lyd. *Metaphrasis in Theophrastum* (ed. Bywater) 21,32–22,1.

<sup>23</sup> Prisc. Lyd. *Metaphrasis in Theophrastum* 21,32–22,23.

<sup>24</sup> Simp. [?] in *de An.* 3.9.291,22 (according to Hayduck, a reference to Arist. *Somn. Vig.* 452a); 28 (Hayduck cites 454a,20ff.).

<sup>25</sup> Dam. in *Phd.* 1.78,3.

<sup>26</sup> Dam. in *Phd.* 1.91,4.

aspect explains desires, the former is the subject of some *gnôstikai energeiai*.<sup>27</sup> Further, when Damascius summarizes his thesis about the relationship between the contents that are known and the faculties that know them, including sense perception (*aisthêsis*), he says that, generally, *gnôsis* is in accord with its content (*to gnôsma*).<sup>28</sup> A few lines later, he mentions the object of sense perception (*to aisthêton*) as an example of an object of knowledge (*gnôston*) that shows what exists.<sup>29</sup> From these passages, one can see how *aisthêsis* is a form of *gnôsis* for Damascius and can, therefore, be called a *gnôstikê dynamis* in his lexicon. Furthermore, Hadot concedes that the same faculty that makes us aware of our knowledge as *prosektikon* also knows irrational desires as *syneidos*.<sup>30</sup> There is no reason to think that this power knows the practical activities of the irrational soul but not its cognitive acts. If the *syneidos/prosektikon* watches over irrational desires, it makes sense to think that it is also aware of irrational perceptions. Indeed, it *must* be aware of these perceptions because, in Damascius' system, there is no other way we can know that we are perceiving. As a matter of fact, in the *Difficulties*, Damascius states that the irrational sensitive soul is not able to act "in such a way that would be critical and able to discern itself" (κριτικῶς τε καὶ ἐαυτῆς ἐξεταστικῶς) because it cannot revert to itself.<sup>31</sup> The sensitive soul cannot revert to itself, so it is incapable of self-knowledge. The awareness that we are perceiving must have a different source: the *prosektikon/syneidos*, i.e. the power that watches over all of the activities of the soul. On the basis of all these observations, I think one can reach the conclusion that Damascius also ascribed the awareness of sense perception to the *prosektikon*, even though such a conclusion cannot be definitive given the gaps in our direct knowledge of the works of Damascius and his pupils.

In any case, the general trend for Neoplatonic philosophers was to attribute all self-knowledge to a single power. As I have highlighted in another work of mine, 'Simplicius' clearly breaks with this tradition

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<sup>27</sup> Dam. *Pr.* (ed. Ruelle) I.21,23–25.

<sup>28</sup> Dam. *Pr.* I.181,27–182,3.

<sup>29</sup> Dam. *Pr.* I.182,9–11.

<sup>30</sup> Hadot (1997) 75.

<sup>31</sup> Dam. *Pr.* I.21,23–22,1. In a later passage, Damascius states that sight cannot see itself because no irrational power is able to revert to itself (Dam. *Pr.* I.33,24–29).



since he states that both sense and reason know some activities of the soul.<sup>32</sup> Indeed, the distinction between *synaisthêsis* and higher forms of self-knowledge can also be found in Priscian of Lydias.<sup>33</sup> This means that if Priscian is not the author of the commentary on *On the Soul* that we are analysing, the idea that there are multiple kinds of non-intellectual self-knowledge may have been shared by at least two pupils of Damascius (as we have seen, ‘Simplicius’, like Priscian, probably belonged to the last generation of the School of Athens).

## II. The mechanics of perceptual self-knowledge

The statements of ‘Simplicius’ on perceptual self-knowledge are particularly interesting. The commentator calls this kind of self-awareness *synaisthêsis*. The commentators on Aristotle frequently use this term to mean self-knowledge but in ‘Simplicius’ it has the specific sense of perceiving (*-aisthanesthai*) the sensible object and the act of the sense together (*syn-*). The commentator explains that these two cognitions are inextricably linked because the faculty that knows (for example) that we are seeing a given color, at the same time knows that color.<sup>34</sup> Now, according to Aristotle, too, this double perception is how we are aware that we are perceiving. However, while Aristotle cites two arguments against the hypothesis that it is a sixth sense that perceives the activity of sight in order to prove that such perception belongs to sight itself,<sup>35</sup> ‘Simplicius’ thinks that the concept of *synaisthêsis* is sufficient to reach this conclusion. If the subject of the awareness that perception is occurring is the same faculty that knows the sensible object, then this subject is the sense that perceives that sensible object and it cannot be another sense or, *a fortiori*, reason. If the faculty that is aware that we see is the same as the faculty that sees colors, then this must be sight because the other senses do not cognize

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<sup>32</sup> Militello (2013) 49-106; 212.

<sup>33</sup> *Synaisthêsis*: Prisc. Lyd. *Metaphrasis in Theophrastum* 21,32–22,23. Rational soul reverting to itself: Prisc. Lyd. *Solutiones ad Chosroen* (ed. Bywater) 46,12. The latter statement is the conclusion of an argument that deduces the incorporeality and separateness of what knows both itself and the highest principles. The same conclusion is reached, though in a different way, by Proclus in the 186th proposition of the *Elements of Theology*.

<sup>34</sup> Simp. [?] in *de An.* 3.2.188,12–14.

<sup>35</sup> Arist. *de An.* 3.2.425b,12–17.

colors and reason does not know sensible objects at all.<sup>36</sup> In any case, ‘Simplicius’ thinks that perceptual self-awareness belongs to common sense even more than it does to the special senses.<sup>37</sup>

As for the exact mechanics of perceptual self-knowledge, ‘Simplicius’ thinks that each sense knows that it is acting because when this happens, the sense takes on the form of its object (‘Simplicius’ uses the phrase *analambanein to tou aisthêtou eidos*)<sup>38</sup> and this form is exactly what the sense knows. For example, sight perceives objects *qua* colored, so the form of an object that is perceived by sight is its color. When sight perceives a colored object, it takes this form—that is, color—on itself. Yet, in this way, in a sense, sight becomes colored, that is, it becomes something that can be perceived by sight.<sup>39</sup> This is how, when it perceives a colored object, sight perceives itself.<sup>40</sup> One could think that this is the same as saying that sight is capable of self-knowledge every time it acts. However, ‘Simplicius’ notes that sight perceives itself even when it does *not* see: when it is dark we are aware that we are not seeing anything.<sup>41</sup> Now, as ‘Simplicius’ states, trying to see is an act in itself, so this is another case of sight being aware of its own act.<sup>42</sup> This case may seem to break with the previous explanation of the mechanics of seeing because when one sees nothing, no colored object is perceived and no color is taken on by sight, so, seemingly, here we have perceptual self-knowledge that does not rely on a sense assuming the form of the thing that is perceived. This is not necessarily the case, though, as ‘Simplicius’ states that sight not only perceives color but also darkness.<sup>43</sup> The chain of thought here seems to be that sight perceives

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<sup>36</sup> Simp. [?] *in de An.* 3.2.188,3–12.

<sup>37</sup> Simp. [?] *in de An.* 3.9.290,6–8.

<sup>38</sup> ἀναλαμβάνουσα τὸ τοῦ αἰσθητοῦ εἶδος: Simp. [?] *in de An.* 3.2.189,30–31.

<sup>39</sup> Simp. [?] *in de An.* 3.2.189,30–34.

<sup>40</sup> Simp. [?] *in de An.* 3.2.189,23–24.

<sup>41</sup> Simp. [?] *in de An.* 3.2.189,16–17.

<sup>42</sup> Indeed, for ‘Simplicius’, this would be a tautology as there cannot be *synaisthêsis* without an act. Awareness of not seeing as awareness of trying to see: Simp. [?] *in de An.* 3.2.189,24–28.

<sup>43</sup> Simp. [?] *in de An.* 3.2.189,21–22. In this sentence, ‘Simplicius’ states that darkness is known by sight “in a different way” than color and light. The commentator means that color is the primary object of sight—it is what we see. Sight can also see colorless light, so light is also a visible object. Darkness cannot be perceived in the same way as it is not something that can be seen.

color or what has color<sup>44</sup> but one can also consider light as color.<sup>45</sup> Indeed, sight can perceive light in itself<sup>46</sup> but the absence of anything perceptible can also be perceived, so the absence of light, that is, darkness, can be seen.<sup>47</sup> In any case, it is entirely possible that when it perceives darkness, sight becomes, in a way, dark, just as it becomes colored when it perceives color. If this is the case, sight could know that it is not seeing by grasping its own darkness, just as it knows that it is seeing by grasping its own color.

In summary, ‘Simplicius’ starts from the premise that a sense takes on the form of the thing it perceives and he reaches the conclusion that sense knows that it is acting—or even trying to act, as this is also an action. However, the argument is not presented in this way in the commentary. Rather, both the premise and the conclusion of the argument are discussed by ‘Simplicius’ as interpretations of Aristotelian statements.<sup>48</sup> That each sense assumes the form of the

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However, sight can know that there is darkness because, in general, any sense can know that there is no sensible object within its range. Thus, sight perceives that there is darkness whenever it perceives that there is no light (and, as a consequence, no color can be seen). Sight perceives darkness indirectly, that is, differently from the direct way in which it perceives color and light (see the following four notes).

<sup>44</sup> Simp. [?] in *de An.* 3.2.188,40–189,1.

<sup>45</sup> Simp. [?] in *de An.* 3.2.189,9.

<sup>46</sup> Simp. [?] in *de An.* 3.2.189,20–21.

<sup>47</sup> Simp. [?] in *de An.* 3.2.189,15–17.

<sup>48</sup> Actually, the two mentioned statements are interpreted by ‘Simplicius’ as two *alternative* answers given by Aristotle to the following question: how can sight, which perceives colors, perceive itself, given that it seemingly has no color? According to the commentator, Aristotle says that one can solve the puzzle either by remembering that sight does not only perceive colors or by stating that, in a sense, sight becomes colored when it grasps a colored object (Simp. [?] in *de An.* 3.2.189,13–190,6). However, I think it is fair to link what ‘Simplicius’ says when he comments on the two solutions because when he explains the first one, he does not really unfold how sight perceives itself seeing, he simply says that sight perceives itself acting “manifestly” (δηλαδῆ, Simp. [?] in *de An.* 3.2.189,23). The only actual account of the workings of perceptual self-knowledge is given in the exposition of the second argument when ‘Simplicius’ describes how sight takes the form of the colored object. Moreover, the two arguments, as explained by ‘Simplicius’, are compatible because—as I will show—when expounding the second argument, he states that a sense takes the form of its objects *by acting* and the fundamental point of the first argument is that the sense knows itself *acting*. “Sight perceives itself because it takes the color of the thing it perceives, and it

thing it perceives is the way in which ‘Simplicius’ interprets Aristotle’s statement that “what sees is in a way colored”.<sup>49</sup> This statement is, in turn, Aristotle’s solution to the problem that, if sight—that is, what sees—can be perceived by itself and if what is perceived by sight must have color, then “what sees in the first place (πρῶτον) will have color, too”.<sup>50</sup> According to ‘Simplicius’, πρῶτον here should be interpreted as another way of saying καθ’ αὐτό, “in itself”. That is, according to the commentator, Aristotle is referring to the fact that even though the objects of the other senses are also often colored, this is not essential to their being tasted, touched, etc. On the other hand, what is seen must have color, that is, it is colored *per se*.<sup>51</sup> So, according to ‘Simplicius’, Aristotle just means that if sight perceives itself, it has color *and this is not by accident*. Now, the commentator is aware that talking about sight taking on the form of the visible object and becoming colored may seem a concession to the passive view of perception. In order to dismiss this wrong interpretation, ‘Simplicius’ makes it clear that senses are active, not passive. More specifically, they are active because they produce not the sensible form but, rather, a judgment about it. So it is wrong both to say that a sense is affected (*paschei*) and that it effects (*energei*) its objects so as to produce them (*poiêtikôs*) because the only true statement is that a sense effects its objects so as to make judgments about them (*kritikôs*).<sup>52</sup>

As for the thesis that a sense knows when it perceives or tries to perceive, this is presented as the meaning of Aristotle’s statement that “perceiving by sight is not one”.<sup>53</sup> According to ‘Simplicius’, Aristotle is thinking about the different things one perceives by sight, each in a different way: by using sight we perceive colors and light, darkness, sight, and its absence, and each of these perceptions happens differently. In other words, ‘Simplicius’ thinks that a sense perceives not just its proper object or its absence but also itself perceiving or unsuccessfully trying to perceive.<sup>54</sup> The content of this perceptual self-knowledge is made clear by the commentator elsewhere when he

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takes this color by acting” (second argument) is collapsed in “sight perceives itself acting” (first argument).

<sup>49</sup> Arist. *de An.* 3.2.425b,22-23.

<sup>50</sup> Arist. *de An.* 3.2.425b,19-20.

<sup>51</sup> Simp. [?] *in de An.* 3.2.189,9.

<sup>52</sup> Simp. [?] *in de An.* 3.2.189,33-34.

<sup>53</sup> Arist. *de An.* 3.2.425b,20.

<sup>54</sup> Simp. [?] *in de An.* 3.2.189,19-28.

compares this form of self-awareness to the more complete kinds of self-knowledge that are typical of intellect and reason. As a matter of fact, ‘Simplicius’ identifies three major limits to the human sense’s ability to know itself. First, sense does not know its own substance or powers but only its own activities. Second, these activities are detected only when they are there; so sense only knows itself when it is operating, not at all times. Third, the process of making the sense operate, which allows perceptual self-awareness, is not even started by sense itself because sense acts only when it is moved by a sensible object.<sup>55</sup> Even though ‘Simplicius’ says that the sense becomes cognitive not of the substance or of the power but “of the act alone” (μόνης τῆς ἐνεργείας),<sup>56</sup> it is also possible to declare that, for the commentator, the sense cognizes itself as acting.<sup>57</sup> In other words, the sense not only cognizes that there is a perception but also the subject of that perception (of course, this subject is the sense itself). In fact, in the same passage, ‘Simplicius’ states that the sense “gains knowledge of itself perceiving”<sup>58</sup> and that, in so doing, it knows itself.<sup>59</sup> Thus, a sense knows itself but not in the sense that it knows its own essence or what it can do in general because it only knows that it is perceiving—it only perceives itself perceiving. It is not by chance that if we go back to the explanation of the different kinds of “perceiving by sight”, we find the same expression, “to perceive itself perceiving”. ‘Simplicius’ states that sight perceives “itself, both not seeing anything and seeing”, that “it perceives itself acting” and that “it perceives itself being not entirely inactive”.<sup>60</sup> It is interesting to note that this perception of the sense acting is accompanied by the perception of the act itself. ‘Simplicius’ clearly differentiates these two perceptions because he states that the sight “manifestly <perceives itself> acting (ἐνεργοῦσης) whenever it sees and, at the same time (ἅμα), it simultaneously perceives<sup>61</sup> its own activity (τῆς οικείας [...] ἐνεργείας)”.<sup>62</sup> The

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<sup>55</sup> Simp. [?] in *de An.* 3.2.187,35–188,3.

<sup>56</sup> Simp. [?] in *de An.* 3.2.188,2.

<sup>57</sup> As I will show, for ‘Simplicius’, these two perceptions (of the act and of the sense acting) should not be conflated.

<sup>58</sup> Simp. [?] in *de An.* 3.2.187,31–32.

<sup>59</sup> Simp. [?] in *de An.* 3.2.187,30–32.

<sup>60</sup> Respectively, Simp. [?] in *de An.* 3.2.187,22–23; 23; 24–25. Tr. Blumenthal (‘Simplicius’ [2000] 42).

<sup>61</sup> This perception of the act that accompanies the perception of the sense acting is denoted by the verb, *synaisthanomai*. Similarly, in line 27, ‘Simplicius’ refers to

perception of the sense acting and the perception of the act of the sense are two different perceptions that happen together. The commentator also stresses that we have a similar joint perception when a sense does not perceive its proper object because, in that case, it perceives itself trying to see and it also perceives the attempt to see, which is an act.<sup>63</sup> These remarks make it clear that, for ‘Simplicius’, a sense not only knows things (its proper object and the sense itself) and their absence but also knows an act: more precisely, its own act.

### III. Self-reversion

In ‘Simplicius’ we find three different kinds of self-knowledge: perceptual, rational and intellectual. However, all three are based on the same mechanism of self-reversion (*epistrophê pros heauton*). Indeed, when ‘Simplicius’ examines human beings’ ability to perceive that they are perceiving, his starting point is an analysis of the ability of a power to revert to itself (the phrase the commentator uses is *epistrephêin pros heauto*) because only a faculty that is able to do this can know its own activities.<sup>64</sup> The crucial point of the commentator’s

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the perception of the act of trying to perceive as a *synaisthêsis*. It is possible that this is also the meaning of *synaisthêsis* and *synaisthanomai* in line 25. As a matter of fact, there, ‘Simplicius’ says that the perception of the sense not seeing cannot be a perception of the sense not acting at all because *the simultaneous perception* is in addition to an act. The commentator seemingly means that there cannot be a simultaneous perception of the act if there is no act to begin with. In any case, when *synaisthêsis* and *synaisthanomai* refer to the perception of the act, they do not exactly mean perceptual self-knowledge because they denote a perception that accompanies something that already is self-perception—they accompany the perception of the sense acting. Even though ‘Simplicius’ does not express his theory in this way, one could state that (1) the perception of the proper object is accompanied by (2) the perception of the sense acting, which, in turn, is accompanied by (3) the perception of the act of the sense. As a consequence, both the second and the third kind of perception can be called *syn-aisthêsis*.

<sup>62</sup> Simp. [?] in *de An.* 3.2.187,24–25. Tr. mine.

<sup>63</sup> Simp. [?] in *de An.* 3.2.187,25–28.

<sup>64</sup> The necessary link between self-knowledge and self-reversion is a given for most Neoplatonic philosophers: see Procl. *ET* §83. Indeed, the concept of self-reversion is very important in ‘Simplicius’ for other reasons as well, for example, to explain rational assent, as Ursula Coope has recently shown (Coope [2016]). For late Neoplatonists in general, self-reversion is a key feature of the soul, which explains much of the soul’s nature. For example, based on its incorporeality, Proclus proves that the soul is immortal (Procl. *ET* §187), which is, in turn, demonstrated from the soul’s ability to revert to itself (*ibid.* 186). Moreover, the

analysis is that reverting to oneself means gathering oneself in an undivided unity. A consequence of this is that only rational, disembodied powers can revert to themselves because a body, which is composed by a plurality of parts, is always divided.<sup>65</sup> Indeed, not just bodies but all the things that are inseparable from them are equally incapable of reverting to themselves.<sup>66</sup> This means that sense in itself, being connected to bodily organs, is not able to revert to itself and to perceive its own perception, as is proved by the fact that irrational animals lack self-knowledge, even though they perceive the world around them. However, when sense is permeated by reason—something that happens in all rational animals—it becomes rational<sup>67</sup> and, as a consequence, it acquires the ability to revert to itself. This is why it is only in human beings that sense perceives that it is perceiving.<sup>68</sup> Indeed, the sense that, belonging to an irrational soul, cannot revert to itself and the sense that is part of a rational soul and, as a consequence, is capable of self-reversion are so dissimilar that, as Iamblichus stated, here the same noun has two distinct meanings. In turn, the way in which human sense reverts to itself is different from the kind of self-reversion that reason and intellect are capable of and this explains the differences in the features of each faculty's self-knowledge.<sup>69</sup>

The ability to revert to itself sets human perception, reason and intellect apart from the other kind of cognition, that is, non-human

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soul is what moves itself (Procl. *in Alc.* 225,12; of course, here Proclus is following Pl. *Phdr.* 245e,2-4) and Proclus explains that what moves itself reverts to itself (Procl. *ET* §17). Even more strongly, for Proclus, self-reversion is closely linked to the soul being self-constituted. Indeed, the philosopher states that the human soul is not just constituted by a higher cause but is also self-constituted (Procl. *in Tim.* 2.232,14-16) and that everything that is self-constituted must be able to revert to itself (Procl. *ET* §42).

<sup>65</sup> That only something incorporeal can revert to itself because bodies are divisible, is a tenet often repeated by Neoplatonic philosophers: see e.g. Procl. *ET* §15.

<sup>66</sup> The difference between the two statements, “what can revert to itself is incorporeal” and “what can revert to itself is separable from all bodies”, was clear to Proclus who treated them as two separate propositions in his *Elements of Theology* (they are, respectively, propositions 15 and 16).

<sup>67</sup> Sense being rational in human beings: also Simp. [?] *in de An.* 3.9.290,1.

<sup>68</sup> Sense acquiring from reason the ability to revert to itself and to know itself: also Simp. [?] *in de An.* 3.9.290,4–8.

<sup>69</sup> Self-reversion of sense: Simp. [?] *in de An.* 3.2.187,27–31; 187,32–188,1.

perception. The differences between the faculties that revert to themselves and the ones that do not are listed by ‘Simplicius’ when he comments on Aristotle’s statement that belief (*pistis*) cannot be found in any irrational animal.<sup>70</sup> Interestingly, here ‘Simplicius’ examines not only the cognitive faculties but also the appetitive ones, as he considers both “cognition” (γνώσις)<sup>71</sup> and “appetency” (ὄρεξις).<sup>72</sup> In both of these spheres of psychological activity one can find two levels: while the first level is about the appearance of the thing that is known or desired, the second level, which builds on the first, is about the value of the knowledge or desire itself. In other words, the first level is the cognition of the things “as sensible” (ὡς αἰσθητῶν)<sup>73</sup> and the desire for the things “as pleasant” (ὡς ἡδέων)<sup>74</sup> and the second level is the cognition of the things “as true” (ὡς ἀληθῶν)<sup>75</sup> and the desire for the things “as good” (ὡς ἀγαθῶν).<sup>76</sup> ‘Simplicius’ seems to imply that while first-level activities are about external things, second-level activities are about first-level activities. After all, it is the perception of a thing that is true, not the thing itself and, in the same way, what is good is not the thing but, rather, the desire for it. Indeed, this could be the meaning of the sentence that immediately follows the distinction between sensible/pleasant and true/good:

Simp. [?] *in de An.* 3.3.211,10–13

ἐν μὲν γὰρ τῇ ὡς ἀγαθοῦ ἢ ὡς ἀληθοῦς συναισθήσει  
 συναναφέρειν ἀνάγκη καὶ τὸ ὠφελούμενον ἢ τὸ ἀληθεῦον  
 ἑαυτό· οὔτε δὲ ἐν τῇ τοῦ ἔξω γνωστοῦ κρίσει τὸ γινώσκειν<sup>77</sup>  
 πάντως, οὔτε ἐν τῇ τοῦ ἴστοῦ συναισθήσει τὸ ἡδόμενον.

The exact meaning of this sentence is not easy to grasp<sup>78</sup> but I suggest the following translation:

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<sup>70</sup> Arist. *de An.* 3.3.428b,21.

<sup>71</sup> Simp. [?] *in de An.* 3.3.211,10.

<sup>72</sup> Simp. [?] *in de An.* 3.3.211,9.

<sup>73</sup> Simp. [?] *in de An.* 3.3.211,10.

<sup>74</sup> Simp. [?] *in de An.* 3.3.211,9.

<sup>75</sup> Simp. [?] *in de An.* 3.3.211,10.

<sup>76</sup> Simp. [?] *in de An.* 3.3.211,9.

<sup>77</sup> γινώσκειν: I follow the manuscripts here, as Hayduck replaces this word with γινώσκον.

<sup>78</sup> As a matter of fact, Blumenthal, who accepted Hayduck’s emendation, interpreted the text in a different way. He translated it in the following way: “For



For in the joint-perception<sup>79</sup> [of something] as good or as true it is necessary to also consider what derives profit or what proves itself to be true. As a matter of fact, knowing does not consist entirely in judging the external object of knowledge, nor pleasure in the joint-perception of the pleasant. (tr. mine)

If this interpretation of the sentence is correct, ‘Simplicius’ is stating that a judgment about goodness cannot be limited to the desire for an external thing because such judgment must also be about the soul itself: that desire is good if the soul is benefited. Similarly, a judgment about truth cannot be limited to the cognition of an external thing because such judgment must also be about the soul itself: that cognition is true if the faculty of the soul that cognizes proves that its own activity is true. Thus, in rational beings, knowing involves making a judgment (*krinein*) about truth but such a judgment is not only about the external thing and desiring and having pleasure involves having a perception (*aisthêsis*) not only of the pleasant thing but, at the same time (*syn-*), of goodness. In any case, the commentator’s main thesis here is, of course, that while the faculties that do not revert to themselves can only reach the first level, self-reversion allows access to the second level.

More specifically, in talking about faculties that do not revert to themselves, ‘Simplicius’ states that such faculties turn entirely towards the external world.<sup>80</sup> Therefore, even if cognitive, they are not accompanied by the judgment that their cognitions are true, that is, by belief. In other words, animal perception can be true but the animal is not able to make a judgment about it being true.<sup>81</sup> Similarly, the kinds of desire that do not revert to themselves cannot assess their own goodness.<sup>82</sup> By contrast, ‘Simplicius’ thinks that the faculties that revert to themselves can not only do so but can also pay attention to

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in the simultaneous perception of something as being good or true it must necessarily bring with it benefiting itself or proving itself true. What cognizes does not consist in the judgment of the external object of cognition, nor what takes pleasure in the accompanying perception of the pleasant”. (‘Simplicius’ [2000] 70)

<sup>79</sup> As I have explained in my book, here, συναίσθησις seems to mean the *double perception* of the thing and of the truth/goodness of the perception itself but this second perception is possible because of the return of the faculty to itself, so it is a form of *awareness* (Militello [2013] 103-104).

<sup>80</sup> Simp. [?] in *de An.* 3.3.211,7–8.

<sup>81</sup> Simp. [?] in *de An.* 3.3.211,1–5;211,10.

<sup>82</sup> Simp. [?] in *de An.* 3.3.211,9.

the outer world; this is the reason why, when referring to irrational faculties, ‘Simplicius’ states that they “only”<sup>83</sup> aim outwards. By reverting to themselves, rational faculties (as we have seen, this category includes human perception) grasp that they are cognizing and, as a consequence, they can tell if they are cognizing truly,<sup>84</sup> that is, they are accompanied by belief.<sup>85</sup> Human cognition can not only be true but it also includes the judgment about its own truth-value, which is made possible by the awareness of the act of cognition itself. All this is what we mean when we say that these faculties know themselves.<sup>86</sup> As for human desires, it is implied that, since they have or can assume a rational nature, they are able to tell when the desired object is good and when it is bad.

‘Simplicius’ has an encompassing theory of self-knowledge, even though we find it scattered among different *lemmata*. Contrary to most Neoplatonic philosophers (including, arguably, Damascius), the commentator thinks that the awareness of non-intellectual psychological acts is not due to a single faculty because, while the rational soul knows its own activities, only the senses can tell us that we are perceiving. These two different forms of awareness share the same fundamental mechanics, because—as is usual in the Neoplatonic tradition—self-knowledge is always a form of self-reversion and it is not by chance that the sense must assimilate to a rational power in order to know itself: if two different powers share the same ability (to revert to itself), their substance must be similar. This assimilation allows the human irrational soul to not only have first-order perceptions of the external world but also to form second-order judgments about the truth of those perceptions. Interestingly, this pattern applies not only to the cognitive part of the irrational soul but to the desiderative one as well, with the result, for ‘Simplicius’, that the whole human irrational soul ends up being permeated by reason. However, the commentator does not sweep the differences between the lower and higher forms of self-reversion under the carpet. Indeed, he elaborates on the differences between *synaisthêsis* and the other forms of self-knowledge, explaining at length why and how, contrary to reason, sense cannot know its own substance or powers, only its own acts.

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<sup>83</sup> Simp. [?] *in de An.* 3.3.211,7.

<sup>84</sup> Simp. [?] *in de An.* 3.3.211,5–6.

<sup>85</sup> Simp. [?] *in de An.* 3.3.211,1–2.

<sup>86</sup> Simp. [?] *in de An.* 3.3.211,7.

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