Alexander of Aphrodisias on seeing as a relative

Katerina Ierodiakonou

In the sixth chapter of his psychological treatise *De sensu*, Aristotle raises the question whether the objects of sight, namely light and colour, are similar to smells and sounds in that they also need some time to reach their respective sense organs. Aristotle argues that seeing takes place instantaneously, and thus differs from smelling and hearing in this respect, but he recognises that in seeing, too, just like in smelling and hearing, the position of its objects matters. To show this, he points out the difference between, on the one hand, the way that which sees and that which is seen are disposed to each other and, on the other hand, the way equal things are disposed to each other; things are equal whether they are near or far from each other, whereas the objects of sight cannot be seen wherever or however they are positioned. The Aristotelian text reads as follows:

So, is this the case also with colour and light? For surely it is not by being disposed in a certain way [τῶν πῶς ἔχειν], as equals are, that the one sees and the other is seen. For then neither would have to be in a certain place. For to things that become equal it makes no difference whether they are near or far from each other. (Aristotle, *De sens*. 6, 446b9-13)\(^1\)

In his commentary on the *De sensu* Alexander of Aphrodisias cites this Aristotelian passage and undertakes to explicate it. Since this is a central text in Alexander’s discussion of seeing as a relative, I quote it in full:

As I said, he argued plausibly. For not all things which either are or come to be by virtue of their relation with each other [κατὰ σχέσιν τὴν πρὸς ἄλληλα] are in the same way. For the relation of what is on the right consists in a certain kind of position [τὴν σχέσιν ἔχει ἐν ποιῶ θέσει]. In showing that seeing is not by virtue of a relation [μὴ ἔστι κατὰ σχέσιν] he says that things that are equal have the same relation with each other [τὴν αὐτὴν σχέσιν ἔχει πρὸς ἄλληλα] wherever they are. For it is not the case that equal things are equal here but not when transferred, but rather that equal things are equal

\(^1\) ἀρ’ οὖν οὕτω καὶ τὸ χρῶμα καὶ τὸ φῶς οὐ γὰρ δὴ τὸ πῶς ἔχειν τὸ μὲν ὀρθαί τὸ δ’ ὀρθάται, ὡσπερ ἐστι ἐστὶν: οὐδὲν γὰρ ἂν ἐδει ποῦ ἐκάτερον εἶναι· τοῖς γάρ ἴσοις γεγονόμενοι οὐδὲν διαφέρει ἢ ἐγγὺς ἢ πόρρω ἄλληλοι εἶναι.
whether they are in the same place or separated. Likewise things that are similar, but also things that are unequal, are of this kind. He says that it is not the case also with perception by virtue of sight that the position of the objects seen and their distance from that which sees make no difference. For <that which sees> does not see all visible objects, nor does it see them wherever they are or regardless of the circumstances. In saying this he [i.e. Aristotle] is advocating as plausible the view that visible objects travel to the <organ of> sight just as the other <perceptible objects do>, <and not on the grounds that seeing is not a relative> (for not all relatives [πρὸς τι] are related to each other like things that are equal to each other. That which is on the right, as I said, which is a relative [πρὸς τι ὅν], requires a certain kind of position, and the same is true of that which is in front and behind and above and below), but on the grounds that sight cannot be one of those relatives [ὦ τοῦτων τῶν πρὸς τι] which have no need of position and distance, since he thinks that seeing, too, consists in a certain kind of relation [ἐν σχέσει] between that which sees and what is seen. Or better, seeing needs some relation [δείται μέν τὸ ὅραν σχέσεως τινος], though seeing does not consist in the relation [ὦ μήν ἐν τῇ σχέσει τὸ ὅραν] (whereas that which is on the right consists in the relation); but it also <needs> that there is some power that is able to apprehend the objects seen [δύναμιν τινα εἶναι τὴν ἀντιληπτικὴν τῶν ὅρωμένων]. For without this the relation is of no use for seeing. For this reason, <that which is seen is seen> both in being transparent [ἐν τῷ διαφαίνειν] and by virtue of a relation [καὶ κατὰ σχέσιν], and seeing is no longer by virtue of a relation [οὐκέτι κατὰ σχέσιν]. (Alexander, in De sens. 127.12-128.6; trans. A. Towey, modified)²

There are some rather obscure points in this text, but first let me briefly summarise what I take to be the main gist of Alexander’s comment here. Alexander explains that, in Aristotle’s view, the relation between that which sees and that which is seen differs from the relation

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² πιθανός δε, ώς εἴπον, ἐπεχείρησεν· ὦ γὰρ πάντα τὰ κατὰ σχέσιν τὴν πρὸς ἄλλαλά ἢ ὅντα ἢ γνώμενα ὁμοίας ἔστι: τὸ γὰρ δεξίων τὴν σχέσιν ἔχει ἐν ποιά θέσει. δεικνύος δὲ ὃ ὃ τὸ ὅραν κατὰ σχέσιν τὸ ὅραν, λέγει δὲ τὰ µέν ἵνα, ἐνθα ἢ τὴν αὐτὴν σχέσιν ἔχει πρὸς ἄλλαλα: ὦ γὰρ ἐννεαδέκα τὰ ὅντα ἢ µήν ὅντα ἢ ἀντιληπτικὴν τῶν ὅρωμένων. τοῦτο δὲ λέγει συνηγοροῦν πιθανόν ὰντι τὸ δοκεῖ καὶ τὰ ὁρατα φέρεσθαι ἐπὶ τὴν ὅντα, ὡσπερ καὶ τὰ ἄλλα. *** (ὦ γὰρ ὃς τὰ ὅντα πρὸς ἄλλαλα ἔχει, οὕτω καὶ πάντα τὰ πρὸς τό γὰρ δεξίων, ὦς εἴπον, ποιάς θέσεις χρείαν ἔχει πρὸς τό ὅν, ὁμοίας καὶ τὸ ἐµπροσθεῖν καὶ τὸ ὀπισθεῖν καὶ τὸ ἄνωθεν καὶ τὸ κάτωθεν), ἀλλ' ὡς οὐκέτι τῶν πρὸς τὸ δυναμένης τῆς ὅντας εἶναι, ἢ γε οὕτω δέσται θέσεις τε καὶ διαστήματος, ἐπεὶ ἐν σχέσει γε ποιά αὐτῶν δοκεῖ καὶ τὸ ὅραν εἶναι τοῦ τὸ ὄρατος καὶ τοῦ ὅρωμένου. ἢ δεῖται μέν τὸ ὅραν σχέσεως τινος, οὐ μὴν ἐν τῇ σχέσει τὸ ὅραν (τὸ δὲ δεξίων ἐν τῇ σχέσει)· ἀλλὰ καὶ δύναμιν τινα εἶναι τὴν ἀντιληπτικὴν τῶν ὅρωμένων· ἄνευ γὰρ τοῦτος οὐδὲν ὅρελος πρὸς τὸ ὅραν τῆς σχέσεως. διὸ τὸ µέν ἐν τῷ διαφαίνειν καὶ κατὰ σχέσιν, τὸ δὲ ὅραν οὐκέτι κατὰ σχέσιν.

*** καὶ οὕτως τὸ ὅραν οὐκ ὅντος τῶν πρὸς τί supplet Thurot
between equal things, or for that matter from the relation between similar or unequal things; things are equal, similar or unequal wherever or however they are positioned, whereas the objects of sight cannot be seen wherever they are positioned and regardless of the circumstances. In this respect, Alexander further adds, the relation between that which sees and that which is seen reminds us of the relation between things on the right and on the left, since in both cases the position of the correlatives matters.

Next, some clarifications concerning three specific points of Alexander’s text and its translation:

(i) The text is corrupt on line 23. I have not yet checked the relevant manuscripts and I have decided to adopt the emendation suggested by Charles Thurot. I think his suggestion is plausible, but I still need to investigate whether it is a conjecture based on the general drift of the text or whether he followed William of Moerbeke’s Latin translation of Alexander’s commentary, which Thurot also edited together with Alexander’s text.3

(ii) It is not clear how we are supposed to understand ‘position’ (θέσει) in the sentence ‘For the relation of what is on the right consists in a certain kind of position’ (τὸ γὰρ δεξίὸν τὴν σχέσιν ἔχει ἐν ποιῇ θέσει). It could, of course, mean that the relation between things on the right and on the left depends upon their position, since after all ‘position’ is a standard example of a relative in Aristotle’s Categories (e.g. 7, 6b3; 12). But it could also refer to a certain distinction that we find, for instance, in Ammonius’ commentary on Aristotle’s Categories, between relatives that are ‘by nature’ (φύσει) and relatives that are ‘by position’ (θέσει):4

Concerning the independent existence of relatives, some people have said that nothing is a relative by nature, but only by <its> position, for example, right and left and things like that. But what those people say is not right. For cases have been observed that are this way by nature; thus, the parts of the body are observed to stand in a certain relation to one another. For example the liver is on the right and the spleen on the left, and it never comes

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4 Cf. also, the description of the tenth sceptical mode in Diogenes Laertius 9.87-88: Δέκατος ὁ κατὰ τὴν πρὸς άλλα συμβλησίν, καθάπερ τὸ κοίνον παρὰ τὸ βαρόν, τὸ ἱσχυρὸν παρὰ τὸ ἀσθενές, τὸ μέζον παρὰ τὸ ἑλλειπτόν, τὸ ἄνω παρὰ τὸ κάτω. τὸ γούν δεξιῶν φύσει μὲν οὐκ ἔστι δεξίων, κατὰ δὲ τὴν ὡς πρὸς τὸ έτερον σχέσιν νοεῖται· μετατεθέντος γούν ἐκείνου, οἰκέτην ἔσται δεξιῶν. ὁμοίως καὶ πατήρ καὶ ἀδελφὸς ὡς πρὸς τι καὶ ἡμέρα ὡς πρὸς τὸν ήμιον καὶ πάντα ὡς πρὸς τὴν διάνοιαν. ἄγνωστα οὖν τά πρός τι ὡς] καθ’ ἑαυτά.
about that the liver is on the left or the spleen on the right. (Ammonius, in Cat. 66.21-26; trans. S. M. Cohen and G. B. Matthews)\(^5\)

There is no indication, however, that Alexander alludes to such a distinction, here, so I assume that what he simply says is that the relation between things on the right and on the left depends upon their position.

(iii) The last sentence reads as follows: ‘διό τὸ μὲν ἐν τῷ διαφαίνειν καὶ κατὰ σχέσιν, τὸ δὲ ὅραν οὐκέτι κατὰ σχέσιν’. To what exactly refers ‘τὸ μὲν’? I have translated: ‘For this reason, <that which is seen is seen> both in being transparent and by virtue of a relation, and seeing is no longer by virtue of a relation.’ That is to say, my suggestion is that ‘τὸ μὲν’ refers to ‘τὸ ὅρωμεν’, which both consists in being transparent and is by virtue of a relation, and thus seeing is no longer by virtue of a relation (οὐκέτι κατὰ σχέσιν), in the sense that it is not only by virtue of a relation, since it also requires a power that is able to apprehend something that is not only by virtue of a relation but also consists in being transparent.

This last sentence will hopefully become clearer, when we analyse Alexander’s text in its entirety, so let me return again to its main point: It is not that seeing, according to Aristotle, is not a relative; it is indeed a relative, but a relative of a certain kind, that is, a relative different from what is equal, unequal or similar. Thus, Alexander unambiguously suggests that seeing should be understood as a relative, a πρός τι, although Aristotle himself does not mention relatives in the De sensu passage, but only indicates that what sees and what is seen are disposed to each other in a certain way (πως ἔχειν), which differs from the way equal things are disposed to each other. And we find many other passages in Alexander’s commentaries, in which he explicitly says that perception, and therefore seeing, should be considered as a relative.\(^6\)

But one could easily argue that there is nothing innovative in Alexander’s presentation of seeing as a relative. For Aristotle, in the seventh chapter of his Categories, includes perception (αἰσθησις) among the examples of the category of πρός τι:

> We call relatives all such things as are said to be just what they are, of or than other things, or in some other way in relation to something else. For example, what is larger

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\(^5\) περὶ δὲ τῆς ὑποστάσεως αὐτῶν τινὲς μὲν ἔλεγον μηδὲν εἶναι τῶν πρός τι φύσις ἄλλα θέσει, οἷον τὸ δεξιὸν καὶ τὸ ἀριστερόν καὶ δύο τοιούτα, οίτινες οὐκ ὀρθῶς λέγοντες: οὕτω γὰρ ἔγινον ταῦτα τῇ φύσι, ὡς καὶ τὰ μόρια τοῦ σώματος σχέσει τινὶ πρός ὅλλα θεωρεῖται, οἷον τὸ μὲν ἦταν δεξιόν ὁ δὲ σπλήν ἀριστερός, καὶ οἷον ἂν ποτε γένοιτο οὗτε τὸ ἦταν ἀριστερόν οὗτε ὁ σπλήν δεξιός.

\(^6\) E.g. Alexander, in De sens. 16.15-16; 17.12-13; in Met. 324.33-36; 402.8-13; 409.27-29; in Top. 71.4-7; 104.2-6; 407.3-5.
is called what it is than something else (it is called larger than something); and what is
double is called what it is of something else (it is called double of something);
similarly with all other such cases. The following, too, and their like, are among
relatives: state, condition, perception, knowledge, position. For each of these is called
what it is (and not something different) of something else. (Aristotle, *Cat.* 7, 6a36-b4;
trans. J. Ackrill)\textsuperscript{7}

And, just like all other relatives, perception is spoken of, according to Aristotle, in relation to
correlatives that reciprocate, though in this case, just as in the case of knowledge, the
reciprocation is not expressed verbally in a symmetrical way; that is, perception is called
perception of the perceptible, but the perceptible is called perceptible by perception:

All relatives are spoken of in relation to correlatives that reciprocate. For example, the
slave is called slave of a master and the master is called master of a slave; the double
double of a half, and the half half of a double; the larger larger than the smaller, and
the smaller smaller than a larger; and so for the rest too. Sometimes, however, there
will be a verbal difference of ending. Thus knowledge is called knowledge of what is
knowable, and what is knowable knowable by knowledge; perception perception of
the perceptible, and the perceptible perceptible by perception. (Aristotle, *Cat.* 7, 6b28-
36; trans. J. Ackrill)\textsuperscript{8}

Finally, the other text in Aristotle’s *Categories*, in which perception is again used as an
element of a relative, talks of the priority relation between perception and the perceptible.
Aristotle stresses that the perceptible is prior to perception, and his argument in favour of this
claim rests upon the fact that destroying the perceptible implies destroying perception, but
destroying perception does not imply destroying the perceptible. Moreover, Aristotle argues
that perception presupposes that there is a perceptible, but not the other way round; that is, the
existence of a perceptible does not imply that it is necessarily perceived:

The case of perception is similar to this; the perceptible seems to be prior [\textit{πρῶτερον}]
to perception. For the destruction of the perceptible carries perception to destruction

\textsuperscript{7} Πρὸς τι δὲ τὰ τοιαῦτα λέγεται, δόσα αὐτὰ ἀπερ ἐστὶν ἐτέρων εἶναι λέγεται ὡς ἄλλοις πρὸς ἔτερον· οἷον
tὸ μεῖζον τοῦθ’ ὅπερ ἐστὶν ἑτέρου λέγεται, – τινός γὰρ μεῖζον λέγεται, – καὶ τὸ διπλάσιον ἑτέρου λέγεται τοῦθ’ ὅπερ ἐστίν, – τινός
gὰρ διπλάσιον λέγεται ὡς ὁ σώστος δὲ καὶ δόσα ἄλλα τοιαῦτα. Εἰσὶ δὲ καὶ τὰ τοιαῦτα τῶν πρὸς τι οἷον ἔξεσι, διάθεσις,
ἀισθήσις, ἐπιστήμη, θέσις· πάντα γὰρ τὰ εἰρημένα τοῦθ’ ὅπερ ἐστὶν ἑτέρου λέγεται καὶ οὐκ ἄλλο τι.

\textsuperscript{8} Πάντα δὲ τὰ πρός τι πρὸς ἀντιστρέφοντα λέγεται, ὅσα ὁ δοῦλος δεσπότου λέγεται δοῦλος καὶ ὁ δεσπότης
dοῦλου δεσπότης λέγεται, καὶ τὸ διπλάσιον ἡμίσεις διπλάσιον καὶ τὸ ἡμίσυ διπλάσιον ἡμίσυ, καὶ τὸ μεῖζον
ἐλάττονος μεῖζον καὶ τὸ ἐλάττων μεῖζον ἐλάττων· ὁ σώστος δὲ καὶ ἐπὶ τῶν ἄλλων· πλὴν τῇ πτώσει ἐνίοτε
dιοίσκει κατὰ τὴν λέξιν, ὅσον ἐπιστήμη ἐπιστητοῦ λέγεται ἐπιστήμη καὶ τὸ ἐπιστητοῦ ἐπιστήμη ἐπιστήμην, καὶ ἡ
ἀισθήσις ἀισθητοῦ αἰσθήσεις καὶ τὸ αἰσθητὸν αἰσθήσεις αἰσθητῶν.
[συναναρεῖ τὴν αἰσθήσιν], but perception does not carry the perceptible to destruction. For perceptions are to do with body and in body, and if the perceptible is destroyed, body too is destroyed (since body is itself a perceptible), and if there is not body, perception too is destroyed; hence the perceptible carries perception to destruction. But perception does not carry the perceptible. For if animal is destroyed perception is destroyed, but there will be something perceptible, such as body, hot, sweet, bitter, and all the other perceptibles. Moreover, perception comes into existence at the same time as what is capable of perceiving – an animal and perception come into existence at the same time - but the perceptible exists even before perception exists; fire and water and so on, of which an animal is itself made up, exist even before there exists an animal at all, or perception. Hence the perceptible would seem to be prior to perception. (Aristotle, Cat. 7, 7b35-8a12; trans. J. Ackrill)

So, let us apply all the above in the specific case of the sense of sight: Seeing is, according to Aristotle’s Categories, a relative, in the sense that it occurs when we see the objects of sight and the objects of sight are objects of sight when seen. Moreover, the objects of sight are said to be prior to being seen, a clear statement of Aristotle’s realism with regard to the objects of sight, namely light and colour.

Unfortunately, we do not have Alexander’s comments on the Categories, but what we find in our main text from his De sensu commentary shows that he closely follows Aristotle in treating seeing as a relative. Besides, in Metaphysics Δ.15, when Aristotle distinguishes three kinds of πρὸς τι, he presents seeing as an example of the third kind of relatives. More specifically, Aristotle first illustrates the three kinds of relatives by using the following examples:

(i) the double and the half illustrate those relatives that are by reference to excess and defect, and are called ‘numerical’ (κατ’ ἀριθμόν);
(ii) that which can heat and that which can be heated illustrate those relatives that are

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9 ὁμοίως δὲ τούτοις καὶ τὰ ἕπι τῆς αἰσθήσεως ἔχει· τὸ γὰρ αἰσθητὸν πρότερον τῆς αἰσθήσεως δοκεῖ εἶναι· τὸ μὲν γὰρ αἰσθητὸν ἀναφερθέν συναναρεῖ τὴν αἰσθήσιν, ἢ δὲ αἰσθητὸς τὸ αἰσθητὸν ὧν συναναρεῖ. ἀε γὰρ αἰσθήσεως περὶ σῶμα καὶ ἐν σώματι εἰσίν, αἰσθητοῦ δὲ ἀναφερθέντος ἀνήρχεται καὶ σῶμα, – τῶν γὰρ αἰσθητῶν καὶ τὸ σῶμα, – σώματος δὲ μὴ ὄντος ἀνήρχεται καὶ ἢ αἰσθήσεως, ὡστε συναναρεῖ τὸ αἰσθητὸν τὴν αἰσθήσιν. ἢ δὲ γε αἰσθήσεως τὸ αἰσθητὸν ὧν· ζῷον γὰρ ἀναφερθέντος αἰσθήσεως μὲν ἀνήρχεται, αἰσθητὸν δὲ ἢσται, ὃδε σῶμα, θερμόν, γλυκόν, πικρόν, καὶ τὰ ἄλλα πάντα ὧν ἢσται αἰσθήμα. ἢτι ἢ μὲν αἰσθήσεως ἢμα τὸ αἰσθητικό γίγνεται, – ἢμα γὰρ ζῷον τε γίγνεται καὶ αἰσθήσεως, – τὸ δὲ γε αἰσθητὸν ἢσται καὶ πρό τοῦ αἰσθητοῦ ἢσται, – πῦρ γὰρ καὶ ὄξυρ καὶ τὰ τοιούτα, ἢ ὡς καὶ τὸ ζῷον συνιστάται, ἢστα καὶ πρό τοῦ ζῴου ὄξυρος ἢσται ἢ αἰσθήσιν, – ὡστε πρότερον ὃν τῆς αἰσθήσεως τὸ αἰσθητὸν εἶναι δόξειν.

by virtue of the active and the passive power (κατὰ δύναμιν ποιητικήν καὶ παθητικήν); and

(iii) the measurable and measure, the knowable and knowledge and the thinkable and thought illustrate the third kind of relatives.

And when he compares the third kind of relatives to the other two, he explicitly refers to seeing:

Relative terms which imply number or capacity, therefore, are all relative because their very essence includes in its nature a reference to something else, not because something else is related to it; but that which is measurable or knowable or thinkable is called relative because something else is related to it. For the thinkable implies that there is thought of it, but the thought is not relative to that of which it is the thought; for we should then have said the same thing twice. Similarly sight is the sight of something, not of that of which it is the sight (though of course it is true to say this); in fact it is relative to colour or to something else of the sort. But according to the other way of speaking the same thing would be said twice,—‘it is the sight of that which is the object of sight’. (Aristotle, *Metaphysics* Δ.15, 1021a26-b3; trans. W. D. Ross, revised by J. Barnes)\(^{11}\)

This Aristotelian distinction may have little in common with the account of relatives in the *Categories*, but in this case, too, seeing is classified as a relative. Thus, commenting on Aristotle’s *Metaphysics* Δ.15, Alexander refers to the relatives of the third kind as being by virtue of the discriminating power and the object that is discriminated (κατὰ τὸ κριτικὸν καὶ κρινόμενον), and uses the occasion to stress again that the objects of sight are said to be objects of sight, because they are seen by sight and not because they are of sight:

But the objects that are discriminated are not said to be the things that they are of those that discriminate them, nor are they relative inasmuch as they are of others, but inasmuch as others are of them. For things are perceptible not because they are of others, but because something else is of them (for the fact that there is perception of them is the reason they are perceptible), and they are knowable because another thing, namely knowledge, is of them. For, although in saying that one thing is similar to

\(^{11}\) τὰ µὲν οὖν κατ’ ἀριθµὸν καὶ δύναµιν λεγόµενα πρὸς τι πάντα ἔστι πρὸς τί τῷ ὑπὲρ ἐστίν ἄλλου λέγεσθαι αὐτὸ δ ἐστὶν, ἀλλὰ µὴ τῷ ἄλλο πρὸς ἐκεῖνον· τὸ δὲ µετρητὸν καὶ τὸ ἐπιστήµον καὶ τὸ διάνοια τῷ ἄλλο πρὸς αὐτὸ λέγεσθαι πρὸς τί λέγονται. τὸ τε γὰρ διάνοια σηµαίνει ὅτι ἐστὶν αὐτοῦ διάνοια, οὐκ ἐστὶ δ’ ἢ διάνοια πρὸς τὸν οὐ ἐστὶ διάνοια (διὰ γὰρ ταύτων εἰρήµένων ἀν εἰη), ὡµοίως δὲ καὶ τῶν ἐστιν ἢ ὡρίς ὑπὶς, οὐχ οὐ ἐστὶν ὑπὶς (κατ’ αὐτὸν γ’ ἄλληθες τότε εἰπεῖν) ἄλλα πρὸς χρόνῳ ἢ πρὸς ἄλλο τι τοιοῦτον. ἐκεῖνος δὲ διὸ τὸ αὐτὸ λεγόµενον, ὅτι ἐστὶν οὐ ἐστὶν ἢ ὑπὶς.
another we use the [same] case as when we say that something is knowable by knowledge or perceptible by perception (for both ideas are expressed by the dative case), none the less the [two] statements are not the same. For it is because one thing [A] is like another [B] that it is called ‘like’ the other, not because the latter [B] is like the former [A], even though it is certainly true that the latter [B] is likewise referred to the former [A]; and this holds for ‘equal’ and ‘same’. But the perceptible is said to be perceptible by perception not because it is the thing that it is of perception, but because that thing [perception], to which it is referred is of it. For because there is perception of it, the perceptible is said to be perceptible by perception, [just as] ‘the visible’ signifies that there is sight of it. (Alexander, in Met. 406.38-407.12; trans. W. E. Dooley)12

However, what immediately strikes us in the De sensu commentary is that Alexander’s terminology differs considerably from Aristotle’s, especially when he talks of seeing as a relative. For in our main passage Alexander characterises seeing not only by using the Aristotelian term ‘πρός τι’, but also by using – in fact, by making abundant use of – phrases involving the term ‘σχέσις’, which I translate as ‘relation’; for instance, he says that seeing requires a relation (δείχνει μὲν τὸ ὀργανοσκοτος τινος), that seeing does not consist in a relation (οὐ μὴν ἐν τῇ σχέσει τὸ ὀργανοσκοτος), that seeing is not only by virtue of a relation (οὐκέτι κατὰ σχέσιν). And this observation turns out to be interesting. The noun ‘σχέσις’, which derives from the verb ‘ἐχειν’, was used extremely seldom by Plato, and only in contexts unrelated to the subject of relatives. In Plato ‘σχέσις’ referred to a temporary state, often in opposition to a more permanent one denoted by ‘ἐξειν’, a noun also derived from ‘ἐχειν’. For instance, both in the fifth book of the Republic (452C: περὶ τὴν τῶν ὁδηγῶν σχέσιν) and in the Timaeus (24B: ή τῆς ὀπλίσσεως αὐτῶν σχέσις), ‘σχέσις’ is used to talk about citizens bearing arms and exercising in their use.13 Most interestingly, though, the noun ‘σχέσις’ is found in the surviving Aristotelian treatises only once, in a passage from the History of Animals (10.7,

12 τὰ δὲ κρινόμενα οὐκέτι αὐτὰ ἢ ἔστι τῶν κρινόμενων λέγεται, οὐδὲ κατὰ τούτο πρῶς τι, καθὸ αὐτὰ ἄλλων ἐστίν, ἄλλα καθὸ τούτον ἄλλα. αἰσθήται γὰρ ἔστιν οἷς ὃτι αὐτὰ ἄλλων ἐστίν, ἄλλ’ ὃτι ἄλλο τούτων ἐστὶν (ὅτι γὰρ αἰσθητῆς ἐστιν αὐτῶν, ταύτης αἰσθητῆς), καὶ ἐπιστήτα, ὃτι αὐτῶν ἐστιν ἄλλο, ὃτι γὰρ ἐπιστήμη. τὸ γὰρ ὄμοιον, εἰ καὶ ὄμοιον ὄμοιον λέγεται κατὰ τὴν πτώσιν ὄμοιος ὡς καὶ τὸ ἐπιστήμην ἐπιστήμη καὶ τὸ αἰσθητόν αἰσθήθη (πρὸς γὰρ ὄμοιον πτώσιν ὄμοιος καὶ ταύτης καὶ ἐκείνης), ἄλλ’ οἷος ὃς ὁμοίως λέγεται. τὸ γὰρ αὐτὸ ἐκείνῳ ὄμοιον εἶναι ὄμοιον αὐτῷ λέγεται, ἄλλ’ οὗ τὸ ἐκείνῳ τούτῳ, εἰ καὶ ὃτι μᾶλλον κάκεινον πρὸς τὸν ὄμοιον λέγεται ὄμοιος καὶ τὸ ἴσον καὶ τὰ ταυτά, τὸ δὲ αἰσθητὸν αἰσθήθη αἰσθητῶν λέγεται, οὗ τὸ αὐτῷ ἢ ἐστὶ τῆς αἰσθητῆς εἴναι, ἄλλα τὸ ἐκείνῳ, πρὸς δὲ λέγεται, τούτου εἶναι. τὸ γὰρ αἰσθητον αὐτῷ εἴναι λέγεται τὸ αἰσθητόν αἰσθήθη αἰσθητόν· τὸ γὰρ ὄρασον σημαίνει ὃτι ἔστιν αὐτοῦ ὄνυς.

638b17: τῶν ἐπιμηνίων σχέσιν), in which it refers to the periodic state of menstruation, and thus the context is again completely unrelated to the subject of relatives.  

Indeed, it has often been noted that Aristotle has no noun to denote a relation, but only talks of something being a πρὸς τί, i.e. something being directed towards, or relative to, or in relation to something else.

On the other hand, the term ‘σχέσις’ seems to have been used by the Stoics to refer to dispositions, which are characterised by acquired circumstances, for instance the disposition of being seated, in juxtaposition to states (ἐξίς) and conditions (διάθεσις), which are both characterised by some particular generic feature, even though they differ from each other, since states are said to be liable to intension and remission, for instance the arts, whereas conditions are not, for instance the virtues (Simplicius, in Cat. 237.25-238.32). Also, ‘σχέσις’, seems to have been used by the Stoics in opposition to ‘κίνησις’, for instance in the case of the following classification of goods: Some goods are said to be ‘ἐν κινήσει’, for instance joy and delight, while others are ‘ἐν σχέσει’; and the goods ‘ἐν σχέσει’ are further subdivided into those that are simply ‘ἐν σχέσει’, for instance attention, and those that are ‘ἐν ἔξει’, for instance the virtues (Stobaeus 2.73.1-13; cf. also, Marcus Aurelius 7.60.1.2; 11.2.1.5). Most importantly, it is probable that ‘σχέσις’ acquired the more technical sense of ‘relation’ with the Stoics, at least if we are to judge from few late Stoic texts, in Epictetus and Marcus Aurelius, as well as from our ancient sources that present the Stoic theory of relatives, namely Plotinus and Simplicius. What is more certain, however, is that ‘σχέσις’ meaning ‘relation’ became in late antiquity a much used term, especially by Alexander, Galen, Sextus Empiricus and later by the Neoplatonic commentators.

It is more important, however, to investigate whether we can detect a Stoic influence on our main text from Alexander’s De sensu commentary not merely at the level of terminology. Let us look more closely at what Alexander says. He does not only state that seeing should be

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14 There is an Aristotelian fragment (frag. 182), in which we find the noun ‘σχέσις’ referring to the relation between husband and wife, father and children, master and slave; however, the use of this particular noun cannot be attributed to Aristotle with certainty.

15 This Stoic classification of goods is rather confusing and we do not have enough evidence to interpret it accurately; we cannot even be certain whether we should attribute it to the early Stoics, even though von Arnim includes Stobaeus’ text among Chrysippus’ fragments. A. A. Long and D. N. Sedley (The Hellenistic Philosophers, vol. 1, Cambridge 1978, 376) claim that goods ‘ἐν σχέσει’ and goods ‘ἐν κινήσει’ differ in that the first are both final (τέλεια) and instrumental (τοιούχα), that is, they both constitute eudaimonia and generate it, whereas the latter are final but not instrumental; they also argue that goods simply ‘ἐν σχέσει’ are not enduring the way virtues are. But could it be that the difference between goods simply ‘ἐν σχέσει’ and goods ‘ἐν ἔξει’ comes down to the fact that the first admit of degrees, whereas the virtues do not?

16 For instance, Epictetus, Diss. 2.14.8.4; 3.2.4.2; 13.8.2; 4.8.20.5; Marcus Aurelius, Med. 1.12.1.4; 6.38.1.2; 8.27.1.1; 11.18.1.1; Plotinus, Enn. 4.7.4.7-16; 6.1.30.21-27; Simplicius, in Cat. 166.15-29.
considered as a relative; in addition, he uses the occasion to discuss the kind of relative it is. Alexander claims, following Aristotle, that seeing is not a πρός τι of the kind to be found in a relation between equal, unequal or similar things because, unlike such cases, in seeing the position of its objects matters. For this reason, Alexander adds, we should think of seeing as requiring a relation similar to that between things on the right and on the left. Nevertheless, this is not the only point Alexander makes. The last sentences of the passage contain a further suggestion, actually a suggestion that Alexander himself seems to endorse, if we are to pay particular attention to the way it is introduced with the connective particle ‘ἕ’, translated as ‘or better’, ‘alternatively’. Let me quote once again these last lines:

Or better, seeing needs some relation, though seeing does not consist in the relation (whereas that which is on the right consists in the relation); but it also <needs> that there is some power that is able to apprehend the objects seen. For without this the relation is of no use for seeing. For this reason, <that which is seen is seen> both in being transparent and by virtue of a relation, and seeing is no longer by virtue of a relation.

Alexander seems to propose, here, an alternative interpretation of how to understand seeing as a relative. He now puts forward the view that the relation between things on the right and on the left is not really helpful for determining the kind of relation we have between that which sees and that which is seen. For he clearly says that what is on the right consists in its relation to what is on the left, whereas sight depends upon the relation to its objects but does not consist in it. In order to figure out what Alexander has exactly in mind in this extremely elliptical passage, we obviously need to become clearer about the distinction between something consisting in a relation and something simply requiring a relation but not consisting in it.

Cases of relatives that consist in a relation, like things on the right and on the left, have been presented in scholarly discussions as ancient examples of relational change or, in contemporary philosophical jargon, as ancient examples of mere Cambridge change; that is to say, as cases of change which involve acquiring or losing a predicate without undergoing internal alteration.17 For instance, Plato’s *Theaetetus* (154B-155D) has often been discussed in this context, since it is in this dialogue that we first come across the idea of a relative changing merely because its correlative has changed and not because it has changed in itself.

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Indeed, it is in this dialogue that we find the well-known example of Socrates who comes to be shorter than the growing Theaetetus, and thus he undergoes mere Cambridge change without any intrinsic change taking place in him.

Aristotle, too, has been interpreted as being aware of and referring to cases of mere Cambridge change. More specifically, David Sedley has argued that Aristotle’s two definitions of a relative in the *Categories* reflect his attempt to take into consideration such cases. For although the first definition, which I have already quoted, considers relatives ‘all things as are said to be just what they are, of or than other things, or in some other way in relation to something else’, the second definition, later on in the seventh chapter of the *Categories*, classifies as relatives only those things ‘for which being is the same as being somehow related to something’:

> Now if the definition of relatives which was given above was adequate, it is either exceedingly difficult or impossible to reach the solution that no substance is spoken of as a relative. But if it was not adequate, and if those things are relatives for which being is the same as being somehow related to something, then perhaps some answer may be found. The previous definition does, indeed, apply to all relatives, yet this – their being called what they are, of other things – is not what their being relatives is. (Aristotle, *Cat.* 7 8a29-35; trans. J. Ackrill)

According to Sedley’s interpretation, the relatives of the first definition are soft relatives, since their relative state is not merely a function of its external correlatives but they are characterised principally by an internal condition, whereas the relatives of the second definition are hard relatives, since their very being consists in their relation to something else and their relational attribute is subject to mere Cambridge change. ‘Knowledge’ clearly illustrates Aristotle’s initial definition of soft relativity, since any case of knowledge must be knowledge of something. But knowledge does not consist purely in the relation between the knower and the knowable; it is, in addition, an internal disposition of the soul. By contrast, ‘double’ is a hard relative, since doubleness is a property that consists purely in a relation between correlatives, and there is no internal qualitative disposition of the double item which can in any way be identified with its doubleness.

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19 ἐὰν μὲν ὁν ἰκανὸν ὁ τῶν πρὸς τι ὀρισμός ἀποδόθωτα, ἢ τῶν πάντων χαλεπῶν ἢ τῶν ἀδυνάτων ἢ τῶν λύσατο ὁ ωδεμία οὐσία τῶν πρὸς τι λέγεται· ἐὰν δὲ μὴ ἰκανὸς, ἰδίως ἢ τὰ πρὸς τι ὠς τοῦ ἐστι τῷ πρὸς τι πρὸς ἐχειν, ἢ τῶν ἰδίως τι πρὸς τι ὡς. ὁ δὲ πρῶτος ὀρισμὸς παρακολουθεῖ μὲν πᾶσι τοῖς πρὸς τι, οὐ μὴν τούτῳ γέ ἢτο τῷ πρὸς τι αὐτός ἐστι τὸ αὐτὰ ἢτε ἐστιν ἑτέρων λέγεσθαι.
Nevertheless, not all scholars agree that Aristotle’s two definitions reflect two degrees of relativity, but I do not intend to further analyse the issue concerning the two Aristotelian definitions of πρός τί. Rather, I want to consider the possibility that, even if there are traces in Plato’s and Aristotle’s works of a distinction between hard and soft relatives, other ancient philosophers may have influenced Alexander in his claim that seeing belongs to a different kind of relatives than things on the right and on the left. To put it briefly, my suggestion is that Alexander probably distinguishes these kinds of relatives being influenced by a distinction between relatives introduced by the Stoics, who seem to have articulated a similar distinction in a much clearer way than their predecessors. For such a distinction is to be found in Simplicius’ account of the fourth Stoic category, the category of the relatively somehow disposed (πρός τί πως ἐξοντα).

The Stoic doctrine of the four so-called categories, or the four first genera (πρότα γένη), is quite difficult to understand and constitutes a much debated issue. At least most scholars agree in listing four categories: the category of ‘substances’ or ‘substrates’ (ὑποκείμενα), that of the ‘qualified’ (ποιά), for instance Socrates or a human being, that of the ‘somehow disposed’ (πως ἐξοντα), for instance a virtuous human being, and finally that of the ‘relatively somehow disposed’ (πρός τί πως ἐξοντα), for instance a virtuous human being on the right (e.g. Simplicius, in Cat. 66.32-67.2). It seems, then, that the list of Stoic categories, leaving aside substance which is generally understood as matter, was a classification of characterisations of objects or, in other words, of four ontological aspects under which a given being could be described. According to Simplicius, however, the Stoics’ fourth category of the relatively somehow disposed was further subdivided into again the ‘relatively somehow disposed’ (πρός τί πως ἐξοντα) and the merely ‘relative’ (πρός τί); the relatively somehow disposed were distinguished from the merely relative by the fact that what is relatively

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somehow disposed, for example something on the right, can start or stop being on the right without undergoing any change in itself, but merely through a change in the thing on the left, whereas in the case of the merely relative, for example something sweet, can stop being sweet only when its intrinsic constitution changes:

To put what I am saying more clearly, they [i.e. the Stoics] call ‘relative’ [πρός τι] all things which are conditioned according to an intrinsic character but are directed towards something else [ὅσα κατ’ οίκείον χαρακτήρα διακείμενα πως ὀπονεύει πρός ἐτερον]; and ‘relatively somehow disposed’ [πρός τι πως ἔχοντα] all those whose nature it is to become and cease to be a property of something without any change or alteration, as well as to look towards what lies outside [ὅνευ τῆς περὶ αὐτά μεταβολῆς καὶ ἀλλοώσεως μετὰ τοῦ πρός τὸ ἔκτος ἀποβλέπειν]. Thus when something conditioned according to a differentiation [κατὰ διαφοράν τι] is directed towards something else, it will only be a relative; for example state, knowledge, perception. But when something is thought of not according to its inherent differentiation [κατὰ τὴν ἔνοδον διαφοράν] but according to its mere relation to something else [κατὰ ψυλῆν δὲ τὴν πρὸς ἐτερον σχέσιν], it will be relatively somehow disposed. For son, and the man on the right require certain external things to subsist. For this reason, even without any change a father could cease to be a father on the death of his son, and the man on the right could cease to be the man on the right if his neighbour changed position. But sweet and bitter could not alter if their internal power [ἡ περὶ αὐτὰ δύναμις] did not change too. If, then, despite being unaffected in themselves they change because of something else’s relation to them, it is clear that relatively somehow disposed things have their being in the relation alone [ἐν τῇ σχέσει μόνῃ τὸ εἶναι ἔχει] and not according to any differentiation. (Simplicius, in Cat. 166.15-29; trans. A. A. Long and D. N. Sedley, modified)²³

It must be noted, however, that most ancient sources seem to ignore Simplicius’ further

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²³ ei δὲ δεῖ σαφιστερον μεταλαβεῖν τὰ λεγόμενα, πρός τι μὲν λέγοσαν, ὡσα κατ’ οίκειον χαρακτήρα διακείμενα πως ὀπονεύει πρός ἐτερον, πρῶς τι δὲ πως ἔχοντα, ὡσα πέρυκεν συμβαίνειν τινι καὶ μὴ συμβαίνειν ἄνευ τῆς περὶ αὐτά μεταβολῆς καὶ ἀλλοώσεως μετὰ τοῦ πρός τὸ ἔκτος ἀποβλέπειν, ὡστε ὅταν μὲν κατὰ διαφοράν τι διακείμενον πρὸς ἐτερον νεοσθεν, πρῶς τι μονὸν ἔσται τοῦτο, ὡς ἡ ἐξις καὶ ἡ ἐπιστήμη καὶ ἡ ἀποθήκη τῶν μὲν κατὰ τὴν ἔνοδον διαφοράν, κατὰ ψυλῆν δὲ τὴν πρὸς ἐτερον σχέσιν θεωρήθηκα, πρῶς τι πως ἔχον ἔσται. ὃ γὰρ υἱός καὶ ὁ δεξιός ἐξωθέν τινον προσέδοντα πρὸς τὴν ὑπόστασιν· διὸ καὶ μηδεμίᾳ γενενής περὶ αὐτά μεταβολῆς γένοιν ἃν οἰκεῖται πασί τοῦ υἱοῦ ἀποθανόντος οὐδὲ δεξιοῦ τοῦ παρακείμενον μεταστάσατος· τὸ δὲ γλυκὸ καὶ πικρὸν οὐκ ἄλλοια γένοιτο, εἰ μὴ συμμεταβάλλει καὶ ἡ περὶ αὐτὰ δύναμις, εἰ τοιοῦτο καὶ μηδὲν αὐτὰ παθόντα μεταβάλλει κατὰ τὴν ἄλλον πρὸς αὐτὰ σχέσιν, δηλοῦν ὅτι ἐν τῇ σχέσει μόνῃ τὸ εἶναι ἔχει καὶ οὐ κατὰ τὰ διαφορὰν τὰ πρὸς τι πως ἔχοντα.
distinction and treat the relatively somehow disposed as synonymous with the merely relative, even though the way the fourth category of the relatively somehow disposed is subdivided, here, follows standard Stoic practice. Besides, we have no other evidence as to the explanation why the Stoics came to distinguish the merely relative from the relatively somehow disposed, although Tony Long and David Sedley have plausibly argued that the original motive was epistemological.\(^{24}\) For since the ancient sceptics standardly argued from the relativity of sweet and bitter to their unreality, the Stoic classification of sweet and bitter as relatives, but not as relatively somehow disposed, would indicate that external factors are not enough to determine whether a thing is sweet or bitter.\(^{25}\) But although the relevant surviving texts are scanty, scattered and somewhat confusing, it seems that the Stoics distinguished in a much clearer way than previous philosophers between relatives with a relational attribute to something else and relatives which have or lose their relational attribute depending upon something else.

Which brings us back to Alexander. For as we have seen, in his alternative interpretation of the Aristotelian passage from the *De sensu*, Alexander makes use of a similar distinction between relatives, in order to understand better the kind of relative seeing is: He claims that seeing is not a relative similar to things on the right and on the left, because seeing requires a relation to its objects whereas the thing on the right consists in its relation to the thing on the left. But there are two issues that remain to be settled:

(i) why it is important for Alexander to claim that seeing should be regarded as a relative; and

(ii) why he stresses that seeing as a relative requires a relation to its objects but does not consist in it.

Concerning the first issue, it should be remarked that Alexander on many occasions in his commentary on the *De sensu*, as well as in his own treatise *De anima*, in the supplement to


\(^{25}\) Cf. also, Sextus Empiricus *M* 8.161-162: Τῶν οὖν ὄντων, φασίν οἱ ἀπὸ τῆς σκέψεως, τὰ μὲν ἐστὶ κατὰ διαφορὰν, τὰ δὲ πρὸς τι πῶς ἐχοντα. καὶ κατὰ διαφορὰν μὲν ὁπόσα κατ᾿ ἱδιὰν ὑπόστασιν καὶ ἀπολύτως νοεῖται, οἷον λευκὸν μέλαν, γλυκὸ πικρὸν, πᾶν τὸ τούτους παραπλήσιον· ψυλῶς γὰρ αὐτοῖς καὶ κατὰ περιγραφὴν ἐπιβάλλεται καὶ δίχα τοῦ ἐπερόν τι συνεπιβάλλεται. πρὸς τι δὲ ἐστὶ τὰ κατὰ τὴν ἀς πρὸς ἐπερόν σχῆμα νοεῖται καὶ οὐκέτι ἀπολελειμμένοις λαμβανόμενα, τούτους κατ᾿ ἱδιάν, οἷον τὸ λευκότερον καὶ μελάντερον καὶ γλυκύτερον καὶ πικρότερον, καὶ πᾶν εἰ τι τῆς αὐτῆς ἑστίν ἱδέας, οὐ γὰρ ὃν τρόπον τὸ λευκὸν ἢ τὸ μέλαν ἢ τὸ πικρὸν κατ᾿ ἱδιὰν ἐνοεῖτο περιγραφῆς, οὕτω καὶ τὸ λευκότερον ἢ μελάντερον· ἀλλ᾿ ἵνα τούτου νοθείμεθα, συνεπιβάλλειν δὲ καὶ ἐκείνῳ τῷ οὐ λευκότερον ἑστὶν ἢ τῷ οὐ μελάντερον ἑστιν. καὶ ἐπί τοῦ γλυκύτερου καὶ πικρότερον ὁ αὐτὸς λόγος.
this treatise, the so-called Mantissa, and in his Quaestiones, points out that the objects of sight, too, namely light and colour, exhibit the same relational character that he recognises in the case of seeing. Light, Alexander says, depends upon the relation between the luminous object and the transparent medium, while colour depends upon the relation between the coloured object and the illuminated transparent medium:26

For the colour comes to be present in what is illuminated and in light in the same way that light comes to be present in what is transparent, though what is transparent does not receive light or light colour in virtue of an effluence or in the way matter <receives something>. In fact, when the things that produce these <effects> have gone away, the colour immediately leaves the light as well (in the case where the things that tinge it go away) and light leaves the transparent (in the case where what illuminates it is not present). The sort of change that arises from both sources occurs in what receives them in virtue of a presence and a particular sort of relation, much as [the reflections] in mirrors come to be present in them... This light comes to be by the presence of fire or the divine body in the transparent. For light comes about in virtue of the illuminant’s relation to things whose nature it is to be illuminated. For light is not a body and so comes to be instantaneously. (Alexander, De an. 42.19-43.11; trans. V. Caston)27

Also, in the following text, Alexander uses again the comparison with the relation between things on the right and on the left in order to explain that light and colour do not come about by virtue of an affection (πάθος) or an alteration (ἀλλοίωσις) of the transparent medium; rather, they come about by virtue of what he calls a ‘modification’ (τροπή) or a ‘seeming alteration in accordance with a relation’ (τῆς δοκούσης ἀλλοιώσεως κατὰ σχέσιν):

The modification [brought about] in the air and in the potentially transparent by fire and by colours is not like that which we say comes about in things that are altered. For alteration is a change and comes about in time and with a transition, but the transparent does not receive light and colours in such a way as to be altered in these respects, but the transparent is said to be affected in the same way as if someone were to say that what comes to be on the right of something has been affected without

26 Cf. also, Alexander, in De sens. 31.9-18; 134.11-19; De an. 44.25-45.4; Quaestiones 1.21, 35.9-15.
27 γίνεται δὲ τὸ χρῶμα ἐν τῷ περισταμένῳ τε καὶ φωτὶ ὅτως ὡς καὶ τὸ φῶς ἐν τῷ διαφανείν, οὕτω καταστᾶσθαι τινα, οὕτως ὡς ὡς ὧν τοῦ διαφανοῦς δεχομένου τὸ φῶς ἢ τοῦ φωτός τὸ χρῶμα (απελθόντεσθαι γοῦν τῶν ταύτα ἐμποιούντον εὐθὺς συναινεῖται τὸ μὲν χρῶμα ἐκ τοῦ φωτός, εἰ καὶ τὸ χρωννύντα αὐτὸ ἀπέλθοι, τὸ δὲ φῶς ἐκ τοῦ διαφανοῦς, εἰ τὸ φωτίζον αὐτὸ μὴ παρεῖῃ), ἀλλ’ ἄκοψεν τις ἢ ἀπὸ ἀμφοτέρων κινήσεως ἐν τοῖς δεχομένοις κατὰ γνωμονή σε οὔτως παρεῖναι τε καὶ τοῖς σχέσεις, ἀλλ’ γίνεται καὶ ἐν τοῖς κατόπτροις τὰ ἐν ἄυτος ὀρθῶς... γίνεται δὲ τόδε τὸ φῶς ἐν τῷ διαφανεὶ παρουσία σιρώσεως παρατέρα τοῦ θείου σώματος. κατὰ σχέσιν γὰρ τοῦ φωτίζειν δυναμένου πρὸς τὰ φωτίζεσθαι περικότα τὸ φῶς, οὗ γὰρ σώμα τὸ φῶς, διὸ καὶ ἀρχόνιος γίνεται.
having been moved itself or received any affection into itself. This is what the 28
modification of the transparent in accordance with light and colours is like too; for it is 29
by the presence of what illuminates or is coloured that the transparent comes to be like this, 30
as <it is> by relation to the <person> who stands alongside on the left that the <person> on the right <comes to be situated on the right>. A sign that this is how it is that, as the [person] on the right ceases to be on the right when the one on the left changes his position, so light ceases when the source of illumination changes its position, and similarly when what is of such a nature as to be seen <does so, the transparent> ceases to be like this, not having received any affection by a change in itself, but when the seeming alteration has happened to it in accordance with a relation.

(Alexander, Mantissa 143.4–18; trans. R. W. Sharples)\textsuperscript{28}

The central issue on which the attention of contemporary scholarship has been focused during the last decades with regard to Aristotle’s psychology, and in particular with regard to his theory of perception, concerns the question whether there are in Aristotle’s view material changes which explain the fact that we see, for instance, colours, or whether Aristotle’s doctrine does not involve the assumption of any physical process; the first interpretation is known as the literalist interpretation, whereas the second as the spiritualist or intentionalist interpretation.\textsuperscript{29} According to the spiritualist or intentionalist interpretation, seeing colours does not necessarily imply that something actually moves from the coloured object and starts a material process enabling us to see colours; what happens, instead, is that colours appear through the transparent medium, and this has been described as a quasi-alteration initiated by the object and affecting the medium. In other words, the transparent medium becomes coloured in a way without being really coloured and, in consequence, without undergoing a

\textsuperscript{28} Εστι δὲ ὁ οὐκοῦσα ἢ ἐν τῷ ἀέρι καὶ τῷ διαφανεί τῷ κατὰ δύναμιν ὑπὸ τῷ τοῦ πυρὸς καὶ τῶν χρωμάτων τροπῆ, ὅποιαν φαμε τοῖς ἄλλοιομένοις γίνεται. ή μὲν γὰρ ἄλλοιος κίνησις ἔστω καὶ ἐν χρόνῳ γίνεται κατὰ μεταβολήν, τὸ δὲ διαφανές σχῆμα ὑπὸ οὗτος τὸ φῶς καὶ τὰ χρώματα δεχέται, ἡς ἠλλοκοτίαι καὶ ταύτα, ἀλλὰ ἐστὶν οὕτως λεγόμενοι πάσχειν τῷ διαφανεῖ, ὡς εἰ καὶ τὸν δεξιὸν γενόμενον τὸν χωρίζοντες λέγοι τὶς μῆτε κινήθεντα αὐτὸν μὴ μένει πάντος ἀναδεξάμενον ἐν αὐτῷ. τοιοῦτο γὰρ καὶ τῷ διαφανοῦς τροπῆ κατὰ τὸ φῶς καὶ τὰ χρώματα· τῇ γὰρ τῷ φωτίζοντος ἡ κεχρωσμένα παρουσία τοιοῦτον τῷ διαφανείς γίνεται, ὡς καὶ τῇ τοῦ εὗρος ἀριστερὸν παραστάντος σχῆμαν ὁ δεξιὸς· σημεῖον δὲ τῷ τούτων ἔχειν τὸν τρόπον, ὅτι ὡς ὁ δεξιὸς παίεται δεξιός ὁν μεταστάντος τῷ ἀριστερόν, οὕτως καὶ τὸ φῶς παίεται μεταστάντος τῷ φωτιζόντος ὁμοίως δὲ καὶ τὸν ὀράσθαι περιφυκότος παίεται τοιοῦτον εἶναι ὡς οὐδὲν πάθος ἀναδεξάμενον κατὰ τὴν τέν αὐτῷ μεταβολήν, ἀλλὰ γενομένης αὐτῷ τῆς δοκούσης ὁμολογίας κατὰ σχέσιν.

real alteration. There have recently been other interpretations of Aristotle’s theory, but I think that the spiritualist interpretation comes very close to what Alexander claims, when he ardently defends the relational character of seeing. But does this mean that this is the right interpretation of Aristotle’s theory of perception? Not necessarily; for it could be argued, and it has indeed been argued by Richard Sorabji, that Alexander’s interpretation simply represents the first stage in a long process in the history of philosophy of de-materialising Aristotle’s theory. Again, I do not want to further discuss this highly controversial issue, but I think it is crucial to underline that Alexander’s insistence in presenting seeing as a relative accords with the spiritualist interpretation.

Turning next to the second issue: Why does Alexander stress that seeing as a relative requires a relation to its objects but does not consist in it? In his alternative interpretation, as we have seen, Alexander makes clear that the similarity between seeing and things on the right and on the left does not go further than the fact that they are both relatives, since there is a crucial difference in the kind of relatives they are. Indeed, Alexander specifies why this is the case, i.e. why seeing is not a mere Cambridge change; for in seeing, he claims, more is required than the relation to its objects, namely the power to perceive (δύναμιν τινα εἶναι τὴν ἀντιληπτικὴν τῶν ὁρωμένων) and the transparent medium (ἐν τῷ διαφαίνειν). That is to say, in order for us to see it is not enough that there is something to be seen, we also need the perceptual capacity to do so and the transparent medium between us and the objects of sight. So, seeing may be considered as relative to its objects, namely light and colour, but it is not a relative as capacity of the soul.

The same holds in the case of the objects of sight; they are relative to seeing, but they also have an intrinsic character that is not relative. Light depends upon the relation between the

31 For a literalist interpretation of Alexander’s account of visual perception, cf. E. A. Crampton, Messengers, Mirrors and Light. Alexander of Aphrodisias on Visual Perception, Ph.D. dissertation, UCL 2016. This is the main point of disagreement between my view and Crampton’s; we both argue that, according to Alexander, seeing is not a mere Cambridge change, but she claims that it is a physical change whereas in my view Alexander’s insistence in its relative character justifies the spiritualist interpretation. Cf. also, R. W. Sharples, ‘Alexander of Aphrodisias on the nature and location of vision’, in R. Salles (ed.), Metaphysics, Soul, and Ethics in Ancient Thought, Oxford 2005, 345-62; Alexander of Aphrodisias, On the Soul, Part I (trans. / notes: V. Caston), London 2012, 154-7.
luminous object and the transparent medium, but it also depends upon the presence of fire or of the divine body; colour, too, depends upon the relation between the coloured object and the illuminated transparent medium, but it also depends upon the transparency which, according to the Aristotelian theory of colours, characterises not only the medium but also the coloured object itself. This is not the occasion to enter into the discussion about the nature of the transparent in coloured objects, but it is worth noting that Alexander departs from Aristotle’s account when he indicates that the transparency of coloured objects should be understood as some kind of matter (ūlē πος) underlying colours; as there is a certain matter, Alexander says alluding to the account of quality in the Categories, of large and small, hot and cold, moist and dry, light and heavy, capable of receiving all such oppositions in turn, similarly the matter of opposition in colour is the transparent:  

Diaphaneia is in a way the matter of colour. For as there is a certain matter of great and small, and of light and heavy, and of the other oppositions similarly, capable of receiving them in turn, so the diaphanes is the matter of opposition in colour.  

(Mantissa 147.29-148.1; trans. R. W. Sharples)  

Or similarly, in the Quaestiones (1.2, 5.30-6.3), since in the case of all qualities which are generated and exist in something else there is some matter underlying them, capable of receiving all such oppositions in turn, colour, too, being a quality of this kind, has some matter underlying it; and this is not the elements, which are not themselves coloured, but the common nature and power that characterises them, namely the transparent.

So, although seeing and its objects, i.e. light and colour, are relatives in the sense that they require a relation, they do not consist in this relation; consequently, there is no obstacle to treating them as real and objective. But is such an inference the only possible motivation behind Alexander’s stress that seeing is a relative of a certain kind? The fact that Alexander refers to the relational character of seeing, at different occasions in his writings when he tries

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35 ἐπεὶ γὰρ τον τε ὄντον τὸ χρῶμα καὶ τῶν ἐν ἄλλοις εἶναι περιφύκτον, εἶναι τι ἔδει καὶ σῶμα, ἐν ὑπὸ τὸ χρῶμα, καὶ ἐπεὶ τότῳ τοῦ διαφάνεις σώμα. ὑπὸ γὰρ τότῳ προσεχθὲς χρῶματος, τὸ μὲν ἐνέργεια διαφάνεις ἔχουν αὐτὸ ἐνεργεῖα, τὸ δὲ δυναμία ὡς ἄλλα ἐν δεκτικόν τον το τένταντον χρωμάτων ἀλλήλους καὶ τῶν τούτως μεταξύ. καὶ ἐν παντὶ σώματι χρῶμα ἔχοντι ἢ ὄντι χρωμάτος δεκτικῶ ἐστὶ μεμειγμένη καὶ ἡ τοῦ διαφάνους φύσις.
to explain puzzling phenomena in the Aristotelian theory of perception, suggests that, according to him, to treat seeing as a relative, rather than as an alteration or an affection, has explanatory advantages. To mention just some examples from the Mantissa, in order to explain how the divine body is not affected by the stars that are seen through it, or why the moon is not affected when illuminated by the sun, or that whatever is shadowed is not in any way affected, Alexander alludes to the fact that in all such cases seeing depends upon a relation and not upon an alteration or an affection:

If light is the actuality of the transparent, it will be incorporeal. More generally we also call what is illuminated light, and this is already a body. It has been shown that light is not an affection of the transparent (οὐκ ἔστι πάθος τοῦ φῶς τοῦ διαφανοῦς), and neither is colour itself an affection (οὐδὲ τὸ χρῶμα πάθος οὐδ’ αὐτό), but the presence of these in the transparent is by a certain relation. <Thus> the divine body is not subject to being affected, either, if the starts are seen through it. For the transparent is not affected by the objects of sight, as it is not by light either; for neither for us is to be in the light to be affected, but it seems that to be illuminated and to be coloured come about for transparent things in much the same way as contemplation (τῷ θεωρεῖν), where the inquirer finds <the answer> and has understanding simultaneously, as if the intellect came into contact and came to have understanding. Just so the potentially transparent is illuminated altogether by the presence of fire or something of that sort, and what has been illuminated and is transparent in actuality is in turn given form in a way by the presence of colours, colours coming to be in a similar way to light. In this way neither would the sun be said to be affected, even though it is illuminated by the sun. For as what is shadowed is not affected, neither is what is illuminated.

(Alexander, Mantissa 144.29–145.7)\(^37\)

Furthermore, it is again on the basis of his understanding of seeing as a relative that Alexander explains how it is possible for two persons at the same time to see different or even

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\(^37\) εἰ δὲ ἐστιν ἐντελέχεια τοῦ διαφανοῦς τὸ φῶς, ἀσώματον ἃν εἴη, κοινότερον δὲ φῶς καὶ τὸ περιφοιτημένον λέγομεν, ὡπερ ἢδτι σῶμα. δεδειγμένον δὲ, ὃτι ὁὐκ ἔστι πάθος τοῦ φῶς τοῦ διαφανοῦς (ἀλλ’ οὐδὲ τὸ χρῶμα πάθος οὐδ’ αὐτό, ἀλλὰ σχέσεις τινὶ ἢ τοῦτον ἐν τῷ διαφανείς παρουσίας), οὐκέτι γίνεται οὐδὲ τὸ θεῖον σῶμα παθητόν, εἰ δὲ αὐτὸν τὰ ἀστρα ὀράτας. οὐ γὰρ πάσχει τὸ διαφανὲς ὑπὸ τῶν ὀράτων, ὡσπερ οὖν οὐδ’ ὑπὸ τοῦ φωτός· οὐδὲ γὰρ ἡμῖν παθεῖν ἐστὶ τὸ ἐν φωτὶ εἶναι, ἀλλ’ ἔοικεν τὸ φωτίζεσθαι τε καὶ τὸ χρῶνυσθαι τοῖς διαφανεῖσιν παραπλησίας γίνεσθαι τῷ θεωρεῖν, δ’ ἢμα τε εὕρεν ὁ ζητόν τοῖς οἰκτήμον ἐςτιν, ὡς γὰρ τὸν εἰκόνας τοῦ νοῆ καί διὰ τοὺς τοῦ ἐπιστήμης ἐπιστήμους γενομένου, οὕτω καί τὸ δυνάμει διαφανεῖς διὰ παρουσίαν πιρὸς ἦ τοιοῦτον τινὸς ἄλλος φοτίζεται, τὸ δὲ περιφοιτημένον πάλιν καὶ κατ’ ἐνέργειαν διαφανές ὑπὸ τῆς τῶν χρωμάτων παρουσίας εἰσποιοῦται ποὺ τῶν χρωμάτων ὁμίας τὸ φωτὶ γενομένου ἐν αὐτῷ. οὕτως δὲ οὐδ’ ἢ σελήνην, εἰ καὶ φωτίζεται ὑπὸ τοῦ ἑλίου, πάσχειν ἂν λέγωτο. ὥς γὰρ τὸ ἑπισκιαζόμενον οὐ πάσχει, οὕτως οὐδὲ τὸ φωτιζόμενον.
opposite colours, positioned diagonally to one another; in such a situation, Alexander claims, the air is coloured not by being affected by the different colours, but simply by virtue of a relation.\footnote{On simultaneous perception, cf. also Alexander, De an. 61.19-62.13.}

Since seeing comes about in this way, not by an affection and alteration of what <is> in between, but by a relation (οὐ κατὰ πάθος καὶ ἄλλοιώσιν τοῦ μεταξύ, ἀλλὰ κατὰ σχέσιν), the difficulty (ἀπορία) is also resolved which some people raise, how it is possible for those who see different or even opposite things, positioned diagonally to one another, to see <them>. For it will seem that the air in between, in that the colours collide with each other, that is in that <the cones from> those seeing things <positioned> diagonally intersect each other, receives opposite colours at the same time. This is solved by the fact that the air is not coloured, but through the relation to it (κατὰ σχέσιν) of what is seen the colour appears in it in a straight line with what is seen. For nothing prevents the same thing from not preserving the same relation to different things, just as nothing prevents the same thing from being half of one thing and twice another. (Alexander, Mantissa 147.16–25; trans. R. W. Sharples)\footnote{οὕτως δὲ τοῦ ὀράν γινομένου, οὐ κατὰ πάθος καὶ ἄλλοιώσιν τοῦ μεταξύ, ἀλλὰ κατὰ σχέσιν, λύεται καὶ ἡ ἀπορία, ἣν ἀποροδίσιν τινς, πῶς οὖν τις τοὺς τὰ διαφέροντα ἢ καὶ ἕνα πᾶν ὁρώντας ἄλληλοις διαφέρον ἐκεῖνα ὀράν, ὁ γὰρ μεταξύ ἢ ύπο συμβάλλει ἄλληλοις τὰ χρώματα, τούτῳ δὲ ἐστὶ καθό τέμνουσιν ἄλληλα, αὐτὸν τὰ διαφόρια ὁρώντων, ἀμα δέξι τὰ ἐναντία χρώματα ἀναδεχόμεθα. τούτῳ δὴ λύεται τὸ μή χρύσησθαι τὸν ἀέρα, ἀλλὰ κατὰ σχέσιν τὴν τοῦ ὀρομένου πρὸς αὐτὸν ἐμφαίνεσθαι ἐπὶ εὐθείᾳ τοῖς ὀρομένου τῷ χρώμα. οὐδὲν γὰρ κολύει τὸ αὐτὸ πρὸς ἄλλο καὶ ἄλλο μὴ τὴν αὐτὴν σχέσιν φιλάττειν, δόπερ οὖν καὶ τὸ αὐτὸ οὐδὲν κολύει τοῦ μὲν ἡμισὺ εἶναι, τοῦ δὲ διπλάσιον.}

To conclude, I think it is intriguing that Alexander stresses so much that seeing should be understood as a relative, and in particular as a certain kind of relative that preserves the objective character of its objects. Would Aristotle have agreed with the way Alexander interprets and develops his theories? Ancient thinkers and contemporary scholars share the view that Alexander’s readings of Aristotle’s doctrines are the most philosophically insightful of antiquity. However, before we accept them as truly expressing the Aristotelian dogma we need to examine them carefully, for they can be rather ambitious and thus tricky at times. At least in this particular case of seeing as a relative, I think that Alexander tries to flesh out what is already implicitly said in Aristotle in order to explain better certain phenomena; and I suggest that he manages to do so, by making use of a sophisticated distinction between relatives, possibly inspired by his otherwise philosophical opponents, the Stoics.