Alexander of Aphrodisias on seeing as a relative
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TEXT 1 : Aristotle, De sens. 6, 446b9-13

άρ’ σον ούτω καὶ τὸ χρόνια καὶ τὸ φῶς; οὐ γὰρ δὴ τῷ πους ἔσται τὸ μὲν ὅρα τὸ δ’ ὀρᾶται, ὅπερ ἦσα ἐστὶν—οὐδὲν γὰρ ἂν ἐδει ποι ἐκάτερον εἶναι· τοὺς γὰρ ἱσοις γνομένοις οὐδὲν διαφέρει ἢ ἐγγύς ἢ πόρρω ἄλληλον εἶναι.

So is this the case also with colour and light? For surely it is not by being disposed in a certain way, 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.

TEXT 2 : Alexander, in De sens. 127.12-128.6 (trans. A. Towey)

πιθανοὶ δὲ, ὡς εἶπον, ἀπεχείρησεν· οὐ γὰρ πάντα τὰ κατὰ σχέσιν τὴν πρὸς ἄλληλα ἢ δντα ἢ γνωμένα ὁμοίως ἐστί· τὸ γὰρ δεξιὸν τὴν σχέσιν ἐξει ἐν ποιᾳ θέσει. δεικνοῦσε δὲ ὃτι µὴ ἔστι κατὰ σχέσιν τὸ ὀρᾶν, λέγει ὃτι τὸ µὲν ἢ, ἐνθα ἢ, τὴν αὐτὴν σχέσιν ἔχει πρὸς ἄλληλα· οὐ γὰρ ἔντεκα µὲν δντα τὰ ἢς ἐστὶν, µετενεχθέντα δὲ ὁὐκ ἐστίν, ἀλλὰ ἢ τά ᾗ ᾗ ἢ τοῦ κτηριαρισαν, τὰ ἢς ἢς ἐστίν. ὁμοίως καὶ τὰ ὁμίαν. ἀλλὰ καὶ τὰ ἄνυε τουνιτα. οὐχ οὕτω φησιν εἶχεν καὶ τὴν κατὰ τὴν ὁνᾶν ἀσθηθαν, ὡς µὴδὲν αὐτῆ ἀνθαρέειν τὴν θέσην τῶν ὁρωμένων καὶ τὸ διάστημα πρὸς τὸ ὀρᾶν· οὐ γὰρ πάντα τὰ ὁρᾶτα ὁμέ. οὐδὲ τὰ ὁποὺ ἢ δντα ἢ ὤπωςουν. τοῦτο δὲ λέγει συνηγοροῦν πιθανοὶ ὁνὶ τὸ δοκεῖν καὶ τὸ ὀρᾶτα φέρεσθαι ἐπὶ τὴν ὁνᾶν, ὅπερ καὶ τὰ ἀλλα· *** (οὐ γὰρ ὡς τὰ ἢς πρὸς ἄλληλα ἔχει, οὕτω καὶ πάντα τὰ πρὸς τί· τὸ γὰρ δεξιόν, ὡς εἶπον, ποῖς θέσεως χρείαν ἔχει πρὸς τί ἢν· ὁμοίως καὶ τὸ ἐμπροσθεν καὶ τὸ ὀπίσθεν καὶ τὸ κάτωθεν), ἀλλ’ ὡς οὐ τοῦτον τῶν πρὸς τί δυναμένης τῆς ὀσέως εἶναι, ἢ γε οὐδὲν δέσται θέσεις τε καὶ διασιστερος, ἐπεὶ ἐν σχέσει γε ποιᾳ αὐτῶ δοκεῖ καὶ τὸ ὀρᾶν εἶη τὸ τε ὁρῶντος καὶ τοῦ ὁρωμένου. ὃ δεῖται µὲν τὸ ὀρᾶν σχέσεως τῖνος, οὐ µὴν ἐν τῇ σχέσει τὸ ὀρᾶν (τὸ δὲ δεξιόν ἐν τῇ σχέσει); ἀλλὰ καὶ δυναμίν τινα εἶναι τῆς αντλητικήν τῶν ὁρωμένων· ἄνω ἀρα τούτης οὐδὲν διόν χρείας πρὸς τὸ ὀρᾶν τῆς σχέσεως· διό τοῦ µὲν ἐν τῷ διαφάνειον καὶ κατὰ σχέσιν, τὸ δὲ ὀρᾶν νοέτε κατὰ σχέσιν.

*** καὶ οὕτω ὡς τοῦ ὀρᾶν οὐκ ὀντὸς τῶν πρὸς τί supplet Thurot

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 are in the same way. For the relation of what is on the right consists in a certain kind of position. In showing that seeing is not by virtue of a relation he says that things that are equal have the same relation with each other 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 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 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 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, 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 which have no need of position and distance, since he thinks that seeing, too, consists in a certain kind of relation between that which sees and what is seen. 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 <sees> 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.
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 about that the liver is on the left or the spleen on the right.

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 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.

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

The case of perception is similar to this; the perceptible seems to be prior to perception. For the destruction of the perceptible carries perception to destruction, 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.


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*.


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 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.

TEXT 9 : Aristotle, Cat. 7, 8a29-35

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, of other things – is not what their being relatives is.

TEXT 10 : Simplicius, in Cat. 166.15-29 (trans. A. Long and D. Sedley, modified)

To put what I am saying more clearly, they [i.e. the Stoics] call ‘relative’ all things which are conditioned according to an intrinsic character but are directed towards something else; and ‘relatively somehow disposed’ 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. Thus when something conditioned according to a differentiation 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 but according to its mere relation to something else, 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 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 and not according to any differentiation.

TEXT 11 : Alexander, De anima 42.19-43.11 (trans. V. Caston)

γίνεται δὲ τὸ χρώμα ἐν τῷ περιφοιτησμένῳ τε καὶ φωτὶ ὅσῳ ὡς καὶ τὸ φῶς ἐν τῷ διαφανεί, οὕτε κατὰ ἀπόρροιαν τινα, οὕτε ὡς ἅλυζ. οὕτως δὲ τοῦ διαφανοῦς δεχόμενον τὸ φῶς ἢ τοῦ φωτός τὸ χρώμα (ἀπελθόντων γονῶν τῶν τεταρτῶν εἰσὶν συναπερρῆγχον τὸ μὲν χρώμα ἐκ τοῦ φωτός, ἢ τὰ χρωνικότατα αὐτὸ ἀπέλθοι, τὸ δὲ φῶς ἐκ τοῦ διαφανοῦς, εἰ τὸ φωτίζον αὐτῷ μὴ παρειη); ἀλλ’ ἔστι τις ἢ ἄπτ’ ἀμφοτέρων
κίνησις ἐν τοῖς δεχομένοις αὐτά γινομένη κατά παρουσίαν τε καὶ ποιών σχέσιν, ὡς γίνεται καὶ ἐν τοῖς κατάστροφοις τά ἐν αὐτοῖς ὁρόμενα... γίνεται δὲ τόδε τὸ φῶς ἐν τῷ διαφανεῖ παρουσίᾳ πυρὸς ἢ τοῦ δεξίου σώματος, κατὰ σχέσιν γὰρ τοῦ φωτίζειν δυναμένου πρὸς τά φωτίζοντα περικότα τὸ φῶς, οὐ γάρ σῶμα τὸ φῶς, διό καὶ άχρονος γίνεται.

For the colour 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.


ἐστι δὲ οὐκ ἄνωθεν ἢ ἐν τῷ ἀέρι καὶ τῷ διαφανεῖ τῷ κατὰ δύναμιν ὑπὸ τε τοῦ πυρὸς καὶ τῶν χρωμάτων τροπῆ, ὡς ὁ παραστάντας τοῖς ἀλλοιωμένοις γίνεται. ἢ μὲν γὰρ ἀλλοιώσεις κίνησις ἐστιν καὶ ἐν χρόνῳ γίνεται κατὰ μεταβολήν, τὸ δὲ διαφανεῖς οὐχ οὕτως τὸ φῶς καὶ τὰ χρώματα δέχεται, ὡς ἥλιοσθαὶ καὶ ταῦτα, ἀλλ’ ἐστίν οὕτως λημάνην πάσχειν τὸ διαφανές, ὡς εἰ καὶ τὸν δεξίον γενόμενον πινοῦσαν λέγοι τις καὶ καταθέτει αὐτὸν μήτε τὸ πάθος ἀναδεξάμενον ἐν αὐτῷ. τοιαύτη γὰρ καὶ ἐν τοῖς διαφανεῖς τροπῆ κατὰ τε τὸ φῶς καὶ τὰ χρώματα: τῇ γὰρ τοῦ φωτίζοντος ἢ κεχρωμεμένον παρουσία τοιοῦτον τὸ διαφανές γίνεται, ὡς καὶ τῇ τῶν ἀριστερῶν παραστάντως σχέσιν ὡς δεξίος: σημεῖον δὲ τοῦ τούτου ἐχεῖν τὸν τρόπον, ὅτι ὡς ὁ δεξίος πάσχει δεξίος ὡς μεταστάντος τοῦ ἀριστεροῦ, οὕτως καὶ τὸ φῶς πάσχει μεταστάντος τοῦ φωτίζοντος, ὡς ὁ δεξίος καὶ τὸν ὀρθάθη περικότα πάσχει τοιοῦτον εἶναι ὡς οὖν τὸ πάθος ἀναδεξάμενον κατὰ τὴν ἐν αὐτῷ μεταβολήν, ἀλλὰ γενομένης αὐτῷ τῆς ὁδοιοποίησις 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 having been moved itself or received any affection into itself. This is what the modification of the transparent in accordance with light and colours is like too; for it is by the presence of what illuminates or is coloured that the transparent comes to be like this, 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.

TEXT 13 : Alexander, *Mantissa* 147.29-148.1

ἐστι γὰρ ἡ διαφάνεια ὡς ποικὶς χρώματος, ὡς γὰρ ἐστι μεγάλου καὶ μικροῦ ὡλης τις, καὶ κούφου καὶ βαρέος καὶ τῶν ἄλλων ἐναντιωτήτων ὁμοίως, ὃ δεκτικόν αὐτῶν ἐστι παρὰ μέρος, οὕτως καὶ τῆς ἐν χρώμασι[170] ἐναντιώτητος ὡλη τοῦ διαφανεῖς

*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.
TEXT 14 : Alexander, *Mantissa* 144.29-145.7

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, and neither is colour itself an affection, but the presence of these in the transparency 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, 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 moon 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.

TEXT 15 : Alexander, *Mantissa* 147.16-25

Since seeing comes about in this way, not by an affection and alteration of what *is* in between, but by a relation, the difficulty 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 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.