

Daniel Heller-Roazen

***The Inner Touch: Archaeology of a Sensation* (New York: Zone Books, 2007).**

Reviewed by Jill Marsden

What does it mean to feel that one is alive? Is this a sovereign sensation that one only encounters in privileged moments, in intoxicated raptures or at the edges of catastrophe? Or is it in the instant in which a self recovers itself after sleep, shock or stupor that one discerns, albeit dimly, what it is to be? Could it be that this elusive sensation is something that accompanies all our more mundane perceptions as a kind of background hum, revealing itself only fleetingly as the basic perception that every sensitive being possesses of its life? Or, more modestly still, is ‘the sense of being sentient’—the sensory power which according to Aristotle is irreducible to the five senses yet shared by them all—an elementary form of ‘awareness’, one which precedes and exceeds the categories of thought and consciousness as such? In his enchanting and evocative *The Inner Touch: Archaeology of a Sensation* Daniel Heller-Roazen offers twenty-five beautifully written meditations on sensation and perception which by turns address all of these possibilities. Inspired by Aristotle, whom it is suggested may have been the first to describe a ‘common sense’ by which animals perceive themselves, Heller-Roazen presents his work as the archaeology of this ‘single sense.’

If archaeology involves the recovery of the material conditions of a culture, Heller-Roazen's text amply succeeds in excavating the different discursive formations that lie 'beneath the conceptual edifice familiar to us today' (40).

There are good reasons to excavate. The "thinking thing" of modernity conceals a past still to be uncovered, in which the relations between cogitation and perception, thought and feeling, were not what they became, and in which sensation, the primary power of the tactile being, held the keys to the life of all beasts, no less the two-legged one who would raise himself above those around him. (40-41)

Moving between classical Greek and Roman works as well as medieval, Arabic, Hebrew and Latin texts Heller-Roazen shows how the 'master sense of the tradition' was revisited and reworked. Neo-Platonist readers of Aristotle provided the subsequent Christian and Islamic scholars of the medieval period with a rich and complex inheritance which the early modern European philosophers took up in turn. With deft and subtle brushstrokes, Heller-Roazen sweeps away the clay of historical and cultural accretions to reveal how the 'common sense' (*koinē aisthēsis*) of Aristotle's *On the Soul* (*De Anima*) became sedimented in the tradition. In the course of doing so he contends that the common sense was invoked in doctrines that were not shared by Aristotle and the earlier Aristotelians (98). For example, the Neoplatonic exegetes Simplicius and Philoponus distinguished human animals from non-human animals on the grounds of the power to perceive the acts of perception whereas Aristotle and his classical disciples saw no such boundary and were unambiguous in attributing to animals and humans alike a sensitive nature in common (98).

By way of playful illustration of this shared animal nature, Heller-Roazen's text opens with a chapter entitled 'Murriana,' a prefatory series of reflections 'in which Hegel and E.T.A. Hoffmann's writing cat, Murr, consider the relations between sensation

and consciousness'. In this delicately crafted few pages, Heller-Roazen presents the reader with selected views from the narrator of Hoffmann's *Opinions of Murr the Cat* who reports his ecstatic experience of 'feelings of existence' (*Gefühle des Daseins*), a heightened sensitivity afforded by his nocturnal perambulations over starlit rooftops (13-14). In addition to these sublime moments, Murr contemplates the power of feeling as such: 'For it is by sensing that Murr finds himself delivered over to that simplest and most universal dimension of all things, which is itself no thing: existence (*Dasein*)' (17). These remarks exemplify the diverse qualities of experience to which the 'feelings of existence' might refer, prompting one to question whether it is legitimate to conflate the feeling of life with the sense of being sentient. If this chapter serves to sow a seed of doubt as to whether a 'single' or univocal sense is to be uncovered in the course of the archaeology, it is worth remarking that this is a text which does not presume that its 'object' is ontologically given prior to its work of reconstruction. In this respect, it is as much a genealogy as an archaeology, a contestation of the values that have historically accrued to core philosophical concepts and an ambitious remapping of their terms.

One of the boldest aspects of this remapping is the assertion that the classical authors who discussed awareness and self-awareness tended to do so in terms of perception and sensation rather than in terms of cognition (22-23). Aristotle's *De Anima* is the primary locus for this thesis since it is here that the sense of being sentient is identified as an additional sensory power to the five senses, one which is required to account for the fact that we are able to sense qualities that are apprehended through more than one sense (for example, motion and magnitude). The common sense also enables combinations of qualities to be perceived simultaneously even though they

relate to different senses (for example, bright and sweet). Difficulties arise, however, when Aristotle's readers attempt to reconcile how heterogeneous phenomena such as common-sensible qualities, complex sensations and the sense of sensing are all said to be objects of a single faculty of perception (43). Aristotle's use of a variety of terms ranging from the 'common sense' of the *De Anima* to the 'total sense', 'master sense' and 'primary sense' alluded to in other writings calls into question whether the common sense could be described as a coherent sense at all (38). To compound the matter further, contradictory arguments are to be found in different parts of the Aristotelian corpus as to whether the 'master power' constitutes a faculty separate from the forms of perception or is indistinct from them (45). One cannot help but wonder whether 'the sense of being sentient' is simply the name for the limit of our ability to think outside the norms of unity, identity and the One.

However, whilst the Aristotelian model of sense-perception relies upon an implicit ground of unity which embraces the other senses in some way, there is no suggestion that the form of unity in this case should be located in the thinking subject. Heller-Roazen insists that the significance of the 'common sense' lies not in its proximity to, but in its distance from, modern notions of self-consciousness (40).

It is sometimes difficult to know exactly what modern scholars mean by the terms "consciousness" and "self-consciousness." But if they mean a power of thought or reason, as a reader familiar with philosophical terminology might well infer, it is certain that on this matter, at least, their views differ fundamentally from those of the ancients on whom they comment. (110)

Properly speaking, the sensation of sensing is a concept elaborated by Aristotle's commentators rather than by the philosopher himself. Heller-Roazen notes in particular that in 3 A.D. Alexander of Aphrodisias applies the technical term

sunaisthēsis to the sense that we are sensing and observes that there are grounds for regarding it as a precursor to the modern concept of self-consciousness. However, it is worth noting that the Greek term *sunaisthēsis* contains no reference to a ‘self’ and might be better rendered as ‘with-sensation’ (84). Alexander’s commentary ‘defines a movement of the soul that involves the coincidence not of a self with itself but of an event and its potentiality to occur’ (84). This novel and enticing formulation serves to return our thinking about sensation and perception to a field of immanence which is yet to be demarcated in terms of transcendent subjects and individuated objects. Although it is not Heller-Roazen’s purpose to pursue this non-humanist vector, it provides contemporary readers with exciting resources for exploring the dynamics of impersonal auto-affection. This section also touches on the operation of the effects of palpable differences which conceptual determinations cannot grasp. Later commentators on Aristotle such as Themistius and Priscian of Lydia add the elaboration that sensing-with ‘will not be deterred by the vanishing of that which it would escort’ (89). In other words, an element of the sensing power continues in ‘anaesthesia.’ The common sense senses the operation of senses when they are active but also senses their privation when they fall into inactivity. The central sense is the power in the soul which jointly perceives itself not as a self but as a faculty ‘in which the multiple activities of the senses, all felt at once, reach their “indivisible unity”’ (88). It is in these terms that an alternative cartography of sensation is adumbrated.

It is wholly appropriate that a text exploring the fine gradations of sensation and touch should so skillfully probe our conceptual vocabulary. *The Inner Touch* concerns itself with nuances as much as arguments, repeatedly resisting the temptation to commute the thought of the similar to the identity of the same. Nowhere is this resistance more

evident than in Heller-Roazen's rejection of the version of the Western tradition that would identify in antiquity a sharp distinction between intellectual and perceptual powers. He even goes so far as to argue that a blurring of the boundaries between knowledge and sensation can be discerned in the writings of Augustine where the distinction between them is so prominent (138). To illustrate this point he invokes a fundamental principle of the Stoic system that all animals 'possess a sense of their constitution'. Seneca and others had claimed that every living thing senses and 'cares' for its constitution without ever knowing it as such. For this reason, despite the profound difference between beasts possessing language and non-human animals, there is a more fundamental difference specific to all living beings: 'It is that within each animal which is not the animal itself and, in not being it, allows it "from the outset" to come to be' (115). Heller-Roazen indicates how in the work of Augustine the animal perception identified by the Stoics is combined with Aristotle's notion of common sense to designate an 'inner sense' (135-6). Augustine's assertion that human intelligence 'removes man from the realm of the other beasts' must be accommodated within the broader ambit of sensation (138). Accordingly, when Augustine intimates that a 'science of life' is available in principle only to human animals Heller-Roazen suggests that even this must remain continuous with the 'inner sense' by which all animal life must perceive itself' (141). This is a crucial refinement because it implicitly appeals to immanent, unilateral differentiations which elude specification by concepts. It is this sustained resistance to dichotomous modes of reasoning that makes Heller-Roazen's general approach to these issues so distinctive.

A further source of distinctiveness is Heller-Roazen's proposal that we entertain the idea that consciousness is 'a variety of tact and contact in the literal sense', an 'inner

touch' as the Stoics are reported to have said, of the common sense by which we perceive ourselves (40). Whilst it is by no means obvious what the 'literal sense' means in a text so subtle in inflection and so alert to the different registers of sense, it is evident that this proposal entails a fundamental rethinking of somatic experience. Again, the *De Anima* is Heller-Roazen's inspiration since for Aristotle the most acute of all the senses is the sense of touch. Not only is this sense keener than that of any living being (in other senses many other animals surpass the human) there is a surprising correlation to be made between touch and intelligence (293). Heller-Roazen shows how despite suggestions made by Aristotle himself in *Nicomachean Ethics* and *Metaphysics* that vision may be a nobler sense than touch, 'in the ancient doctrine the power to think finds its roots in the tactile faculty and nowhere else' (292). The tantalizing thesis that self-consciousness derives from our ability to feel and grasp the world around us is lent further weight in the writings of Alexander, Themistius, Philoponus and Aquinas who all allude to the link between the subtlety of man's touch and his temperament and powers of judgment. Aquinas observes that a fine sensitivity is a disposition to a fine intelligence since touch is the basis of sensitivity as a whole such that 'the organ of each of the other senses is also an organ of touch' (294).

Although this thesis is treated with the very lightness of touch which befits the keen intelligence of its author, it may be of some benefit to the reader to delineate its major points more firmly. Two key terms in the lexicon of *The Inner Touch* are *aisthēsis* and the 'elemental' and they are each employed to describe the 'matter' of an embodied-consciousness (although this is not a locution that Heller-Roazen himself employs). Heller-Roazen indicates how the term *aisthēsis* is something of a 'weasel word' in

that it carries the meanings of ‘sensation’ (with its implication of passivity), ‘perception’ (with its suggestion of activity), ‘feeling’ (which describes a broad yet elusive affective range) and may even denote the affections of the inanimate (22-3). Significantly, for Aristotle the ‘element’ common to all animal life, beneath and beyond anthropocentric categories, is simply *aisthēsis*.

It is, quite simply, the element that is left over in human beings once one has withdrawn from them what is particularly human: everything in man, for example, that remains after, or before, the life of reason, everything in him that cannot be said to owe its existence to the activity of thought. This is an element that persists in human nature without altogether coinciding with it. By definition, it cannot be said to be strictly human, since it remains distinct from the activity judged proper to man. To the degree to which it can, however, still be found inhuman beings it also cannot be said with any exactitude to be inhuman ... The remaining element testifies to a dimension of the living being in which the distinction between the human and the inhuman simply has no pertinence: a region common, by definition, to all animal life. (92-3)

It is intriguing that in articulating *aisthēsis* that Heller-Roazen should have such recourse to the language of the elemental. It is only in his unassuming final chapter that he alludes to this idea more directly in his brief reference to the dimension of the flesh in Merleau-Ponty’s notes for *The Visible and the Invisible*. Implicit in Heller-Roazen’s appeal to Merleau-Ponty is the desire to redraw the lineaments of sense and sensibility without recourse to a pre-given empirical realm of individuated objects and coherent subjects. Although Heller-Roazen’s terminology is non-phenomenological, the spirit of his investigation involves a constant ‘bracketing of the natural attitude’. And again, whilst his language is non-Deleuzian, his work returns thinking to a field of pre-individual singularities. Just as Merleau-Ponty attempts to move beyond the world of perception to the conditions for the experience of perception, Heller-Roazen’s approach is to explore sensation without presupposing the nature of that

which enables sensation to take place. At the limit this leads in the direction of thinking about the Deleuzian percept, especially because self-hood is so resolutely suspended.

Heller-Roazen's account of *aisthēsis* also serves to account for the specific shape that his archaeological study assumes, skipping between the early modern philosophers and nineteenth century accounts of nervous maladies and sensory delusions without engagement with Kant and the major European philosophers of the post-Enlightenment:

[B]y definition, animals for Aristotle and his successors, had all met in the terrain of the activity once called *aisthēsis*. Descartes' definition of the conscious mind erected an insurmountable barrier in this field. (165)

Since the medieval 'common sense' shared by human and non-human animals alike could find no place in the Cartesian theory of perception, after Descartes, the expression 'common sense' progressively lost its 'technical value as the designation of a power of perception' and came to signify 'sound judgment' as it still does today (167). Accordingly, the last site of significant contestation for Heller-Roazen is Leibniz, whose idiosyncratic position may owe something to the materialist monism of Campanella and Bacon. Like Descartes, Leibniz took the mind to be immaterial, immortal and distinct by nature from the body and he also held that it is the essential nature of the soul to always think. However, as evidence of the latter thesis, Leibniz appealed to the existence of 'small perceptions' that are always retained by the mind even though they may be too weak, banal or fleeting to be noticed in themselves. His argument went that we fail to realize that we think of many things all at once because we only pay heed to those things that stand out most distinctly. As a consequence, it is only when self-conscious attention is relaxed—in sleep or in a dazed or entranced

state—that a myriad of small, confused sensations are registered at all.

Famously, Locke disputed the idea that the human soul is always thinking even when one does not perceive it, his position being that it is not possible for a sentient being to think and not be conscious of it. Effectively, for Locke as for mainstream philosophy more broadly, thought is the perception of what passes in a human's mind. As Heller-Roazen puts it:

A central presupposition of many of the early modern discussions of the nature of thought, Cartesian and anti-Cartesian alike, now comes clearly to light. It is the principle that thinking and consciousness are strictly correlative: that thought in other words cannot occur without the thinker's being simultaneously aware of it. (186-7)

Challenging this deeply ingrained prejudice throughout his magisterial text, Heller-Roazen explores *aisthēsis* as the dimension of sensation which persists in the suspension of perceptual and intellectual activity whether in sleep (65-71), awakening (73-77) or coming to one's senses after some kind of physiological trauma or assault (211-218). In the case of the latter, Heller-Roazen relates Rousseau's description of the incomparable feeling he experienced when coming to his senses having been knocked unconscious by a charging dog. On regaining his senses Rousseau experiences a condition of awareness without either a clear object or an identifiable subject:

This first sensation was a delightful moment. I was still not yet aware of anything other than it. In this instant I was being born again, and it seemed as if everything I perceived was filled with my light existence. (from the second chapter of *Reveries of the Solitary Walker*, cited by Heller Roazen 213)

Delightful moments such as these thread through *The Inner Touch* from beginning to end. With these finely judged examples, Heller-Roazen succeeds in exemplifying one of the most enticing and provocative aspects of the book, namely, its pursuit of Murr

the cat's idea that 'one only gets used to consciousness' (14). If reason is nothing other than the capacity to act with consciousness, the extent to which it can be set aside when exploring the nature of sensation is potentially vast. In his many examples of pre-individuated sensory experience, including his absorbing accounts of anomalous perceptions, negation delirium and the phenomenon of 'phantom limbs', Heller-Roazen's work prompts a radical rethinking of the limits of sensory experiences.

In his closing chapter Heller-Roazen leaves his readers with the question: 'What would it mean for touch to be the root of thinking and for thinking, in turn, to be the most elevated form of a kind of touch' (295). It is fair to say that a close engagement with this question would entail teasing out the relationship between touch and the more general domain of *aisthēsis*, a project which would necessarily involve revisiting the awkward question of what it means to speak of touch in the 'literal sense'. Perhaps too it might entail questioning the extent to which *aisthēsis* relates to the aesthetic, not simply because art is a privileged site of inquiry for Merleau-Ponty's elemental thinking but because it is in the domain of artistic experimentation that the limits and potentialities of the sensory field are recast. If *The Inner Touch* is an exquisite book it is because it contributes to this creative reconfiguration, helping to make the indiscernible zones of the body newly perceptible and composing the interplay of nameless sensations which enable both a work and a body to 'be.'