

Aristotle on Illusory Perception: Phantasia without Phantasmata

Noell Birondo

In De Anima iii.3 Aristotle presents his official discussion of phantasia (“imagination” in most translations).¹ At the very outset of the discussion Aristotle offers as an endoxon that “phantasia is that in virtue of which we say that a phantasma occurs to us” (428a1-2). Now the claim can seem to mark a necessary feature of any episode of phantasia,² so that an episode of phantasia just is an episode in which a phantasma occurs to someone. But reading the claim in that way can pose the following problem for Aristotle’s account of phantasia. Aristotle employs phantasia both to explain certain sorts of perceptual appearances – cases in which one perceives something as being one way or another – as well as to explain post-perceptual appearances – cases such as dreaming, memory, and hallucination. And if one takes “phantasma” to mean “mental image,” as has seemed inescapable to many commentators,³ then Aristotle ends up committed to what seems a certainly implausible view: that in cases of perception in which someone mistakenly takes something to be a man – an episode of phantasia – what she perceives is a mental image of a man.

Now it would be silly to deny that Aristotle considers phantasia to be that in virtue of

¹ Unless otherwise noted, quotations from De Anima (hereinafter DA) will be from D. W. Hamlyn’s translation (1968), although throughout I insert the transliterations phantasia, phantasma, phantasmata, and so on, for clarity and for emphasis. As the text makes clear, I take phantasmata, quite straightforwardly, to be mental images: see De Insomniis 461b29ff., and De Memoria 450b26-30, 451a8-13. Hamlyn, in the usual though somewhat misleading way, translates “phantasia” as “imagination.”

² Aristotle employs the word “phantasia” in a variety of ways: as capacity, agency, and result. By an “episode of phantasia” I mean the actual occurrence of, say, dreaming. This as opposed either to the dream (or the dream image) itself, or to the capacity to dream.

³ See Hamlyn’s comments on DA 431a8 in Hamlyn 1968; Sorabji 1972; and Hicks 1907; all cited in Nussbaum 1978. More recently, see Everson 1997, ch. 5, sect. 2; Wedin 1988, chs. 2-3; and Sorabji 1992. As against this, Malcolm Schofield (1992) argues, etymologically, that “phantasma,” until at least Plato, has the broad meaning captured by words like “appearance” or “apparition,” not anything as specific as “mental image.” The word “phantasma,” Schofield argues, derives from the verb “phantazo,” “make apparent,” “make show,” “present.” And Plato uses “phantasma” as the abstract noun corresponding to the verb “phainesthai,” “appear.” And yet all of Schofield’s claims about the etymology of “phantasma,” are consistent with the restricted technical use found in Aristotle’s psychological works.

which a phantasma occurs to someone; it is not silly, however, to deny that phantasmata are present in every case in which phantasia is operative.⁴ In particular, there is no good reason to think that phantasmata are present in cases of illusory perception – cases of perception in which, if one were to assent to the content of one’s perception, one’s belief that things are as they appear would be false. By denying that phantasmata are present in every case in which phantasia is operative, one can accept that phantasmata are indeed mental images and simply deny that Aristotle’s claim at DA 428a1-2 is meant to mark a necessary feature of any episode of phantasia.

My aim in what follows is thus to expose what I take to be a misreading of Aristotle’s initial claim in the discussion of phantasia in DA iii.3. I will not here undertake the much more ambitious task of offering my own account of what phantasia is according to Aristotle. The misreading that I want to expose obstructs an undistorted view of Aristotle’s account of phantasia, an account that I cannot even begin to offer here.

1. To focus the discussion, I am going to consider some of what Martha Nussbaum says about phantasia.⁵ There are two good reasons for doing so. Nussbaum wants to avoid attributing to Aristotle the implausible view that illusory perceptions are cases in which what one perceives are mental images. But if an episode of phantasia just is an episode in which a phantasma occurs to someone – taking the claim at DA 428a1-2 to mark a necessary feature of any episode of phantasia – then Nussbaum can do so only by maintaining that phantasmata do not feature unequivocally in Aristotle as mental images. That claim, though, as I will argue, is very difficult to sustain. An examination of Nussbaum’s account of phantasia will first, then, display an

⁴ To deny that phantasmata are sometimes present would be silly: for it is quite clear that phantasmata are present in cases of dreaming, memory, and hallucination, all of which Aristotle attributes to phantasia. (See n. 1 above.) But there is no good reason to insist that phantasmata are present in every case in which phantasia is operative; in cases of illusory perception phantasmata would be on the one hand queer, and on the other hand superfluous. Nor does Aristotle anywhere claim that phantasmata are present in these cases. That anyway is what I shall be arguing.

⁵ For Nussbaum’s account of phantasia, see Nussbaum 1978. Parenthetical page references to Nussbaum are to this work.

example of the misreading of DA 428a1-2 that I want to expose.⁶ An examination of Nussbaum's account will also show that there is in fact no good reason for denying that phantasmata according to Aristotle just are mental images. For the evidence that Nussbaum brings to bear on the question is insufficient. After examining some of the drawbacks of Nussbaum's account of phantasia, I then go on to show how one can avoid the consequence Nussbaum wants to avoid simply by denying that phantasmata appear in every case in which phantasia is operative.

Nussbaum's own strategy for interpreting what Aristotle says about phantasia is to avoid focusing solely on the discussions of it in DA iii.3 and in parts of the Parva Naturalia (PN) (221), discussions in which Aristotle describes episodes of phantasia as movements (*kinêseis*) taking place as a result of actual sense perceptions (e.g., DA 428b11-18). Instead of focusing solely on those discussions, Nussbaum wants to keep in view the wide variety of contexts in which Aristotle assigns work to phantasia – contexts to be found not only in DA, but also in De Motu Animalium and throughout the PN. Interpreters go wrong in general, Nussbaum thinks, by failing to give enough importance to the discussions of phantasia found throughout Aristotle's psychological works; and they go wrong in particular, she thinks, by not paying adequate attention to the role Aristotle assigns phantasia in his accounts of animal movement (both in De Motu Animalium and in DA). Nussbaum's professed thesis is therefore that "only Aristotle's basic interest in appearing, and not the decaying-sense theory put forward at the end of iii.3 and in parts of the PN, can serve to explain the extended role ascribed to phantasia in action contexts" (222).

Nussbaum thus stands "Aristotle's basic interest in appearing" in opposition to "the decaying-sense theory" put forward at the end of DA iii.3. That opposition is appropriate, as Nussbaum sees the matter, because one of the main contentions of those commentators who emphasize the decaying-sense passages in DA is that phantasmata are mental images. Therefore Nussbaum's claim – that only Aristotle's basic interest in appearing can serve to explain all of the

⁶ Another example of the misreading can be found in Schofield 1992, especially sect. II, "Phantasia and Phainetai".

contexts in which he invokes phantasia – also serves as a denial that mental images can serve to explain those contexts. Referring to the decaying-sense passages, she writes that “There are many more passages that could quite adequately be explained without invoking images and where it seems more fruitful to emphasize the connection with phainesthai. Some passages make no sense at all if images are read in” (223).

The well-known conclusion of Nussbaum’s account is that according to Aristotle phantasia is an interpretive, “seeing as” aspect of perceptual experience: “For what phainetai F to someone is, after all, what is seen by him as F. His phainomenon agathon is his view of the good. The phainomena are things in the world as seen (and reported) by human observers” (231).

Now, my concern here is not to evaluate Nussbaum’s account of what phantasia is according to Aristotle. My concern is rather to provide reasons for rejecting Nussbaum’s contention that “in no case should we assume that phantasma means ‘image.’ Its meaning is ‘what appears,’ and context must determine its usage” (244). Nussbaum here once again stands “Aristotle’s basic interest in appearing” in opposition to “the decaying sense theory” of DA iii.3, and against construing phantasmata unequivocally as mental images. But as we are about to see, Nussbaum in fact provides no real reason to think that phantasmata are not mental images. And what she fails to notice is that one can pay adequate attention to Aristotle’s general interest in appearing even though one takes phantasmata to be mental images.

2. After claiming that “phantasma” does not mean “image,” Nussbaum goes on to offer the following three passages as evidence for her claim (245).

Nicomachean Ethics 1114a32ff.: All men strive for the apparent good (phainomenon agathon): but no one is in control of the appearing (phantasia): the way the end appears (phainetai) to someone depends on what sort of man he is.

Eudemian Ethics 1235a25-29: Pleasure is desired, for it is an apparent good (phainomenon agathon). Some believe it is good; but to some it appears (phainetai) good, even if they do not believe it to be so – for phantasia and doxa are not in the same part of the soul.

De Insomniis 460b19: The sun appears (phainetai) a foot wide; but often something else opposes this phantasia.

Nussbaum's obviously correct reading of these three passages (in which phantasia is of course operative) is that they do not even suggest the presence of mental images. She writes that "Often when Aristotle uses phantasia and related words, the context makes no reference to imaging, and the words serve in a very general way to indicate Aristotle's interest in the way a scene looks to the living creature, what he perceives it as" (245). And yet one can grant that the passages have nothing to do with images, while also realizing that none of them lend the least bit of support to the claim that phantasmata are not images: neither "phantasma" nor "phantasmata" even so much as occurs in them. One can hardly expect to show that "phantasma" does not mean "image" by citing passages in which the word "phantasma" is not employed.

Nussbaum does pick up on that cue in offering as evidence the following passage from DA, a passage in which Aristotle discusses the workings of 'deliberative' phantasia.

(Deliberative phantasia contrasts with the more common type of phantasia, the perceptual.)

According to Aristotle, one way that deliberative phantasia gets employed is when an agent looks to the future, weighing one possible course of action against another. The actual workings of deliberative phantasia are explained in the passage that Nussbaum cites: "For whether he will do this or this is already the job of reasoning. And he must measure using a single criterion; for he seeks the greater good. So he is able to make one phantasma out of many" (434a7-10, Nussbaum's translation). According to Nussbaum, the passage is "a very difficult passage for image-theorists to interpret" (263).

In fact, however, Nussbaum's own reading of the passage is one that can indeed be accepted by someone who endorses an image-reading of phantasmata. On Nussbaum's reading of the passage, human beings are able to "look to future and to past experiences, deliberating and weighing one 'this' against another." They become aware of the possible outcomes of various courses of actions, and are able:

(1) To see the consequences of an action as following from that action – the two "appearings" being thought by reason as a unity.

(2) To measure one set of consequences against another in terms of some criterion whose maximization is desired – thus relating the two sets of consequences and making a unified appearing. The discrete considerations, "This or that," become the unity, "This rather than that."
(264)

But then Nussbaum's characterization of deliberative phantasia can indeed be endorsed even by someone who takes phantasmata to be mental images. To do that, one needs only to think of mental images where Nussbaum has appearings. What emerges is a conception of deliberation according to which one visualizes the probable outcomes of the courses of action open to one, and then settles on the one that best measures up to the criterion by which one is choosing between them.

That response to Nussbaum is of course an obvious one; and it is therefore one to which she has a ready reply. Nussbaum says that a conception of deliberation like the one just sketched "seems an unfortunately crude and over-narrow picture of deliberation to ascribe to Aristotle, in that it implies . . . that whatever criterion one selects (goodness, for example, as well as bigness or beauty) must be susceptible of pictorial representation" (263). But I am unable to see the putative implication. Nothing in the passage so much as suggests that the criterion itself must be a phantasma; the claim is just that someone engaged in deliberation must be able to choose between

the actions available to her by visualizing which of them is likely to produce the best or the most beautiful outcomes.⁷ And given that Aristotle says explicitly that phantasia is (at least sometimes) up to us (DA 427b16-22), attributing to him a conception of deliberative phantasia according to which one visualizes the probable outcomes of actions is hardly implausible. The claim that phantasmata are not mental images remains unsupported.⁸

3. Nussbaum herself admits quite straightforwardly that in Aristotle's accounts of memory and dreaming Aristotle "does indeed invoke images" (249). Her rather sharp unwillingness to allow that phantasmata feature as mental images throughout Aristotle's psychological works stems, as I mentioned above, from the fact that she stands "Aristotle's basic interest in appearing" in opposition to "the decaying-sense theory" of DA iii.3, a theory which seems inevitably to usher in mental images. Now, mental images can seem to threaten the very plausibility of Aristotle's conception of phantasia, only if one insists that mental images are present in every case in which phantasia is operative. That implausibility emerges, in particular, if mental images are read into

⁷ I resist the suggestion that in considering available courses of actions (praxeis, not poêseis: see DA 434a7-10), someone might perform the action that she thinks will have the biggest outcome. In fact I have no idea how bigness – unless Nussbaum is speaking kata metaphoran – could be a criterion for deliberating over actions, whether or not one thinks bigness is "susceptible of pictorial representation." Moreover, Nussbaum herself, referring to cases in which mental images are present, admits that images need not be objectionably pictorial (250-251).

⁸ Nussbaum might try to enlist the efforts of Schofield who, in a vein similar to the one running through Nussbaum's account of phantasia, writes that if "phantasma" in the claim at DA 428a1-2 is to be translated as "mental image," then "it will require considerable ingenuity to explain on Aristotle's behalf why examples such as those of the sun appearing to be a foot across or of an indistinctly perceived thing looking like a man are pertinent to a case of phantasia. In neither of these examples does it seem plausible to suppose that contemplation of mental images is involved; nor does Aristotle in presenting them suggest that it is" (Schofield 1992, 265-267). The "crucial piece of evidence" that Schofield uses to support his claim that phantasmata are not mental images is De Insomniis 460b16-20. But, contrary to Schofield's translation, W. S. Hett (1957) translates the passage: "The reason why this happens is that the controlling sense (to kurion) does not judge these things by the same faculty as that by which sense images (phantasmata) occur. This is proved by the fact that the sun appears (phainetai) to measure a foot across, but something else contradicts this impression (tên phantasian)."⁹ Now the faculty by which phantasmata occur is either just phantasia itself or else it is phantastikon. But then what the passage amounts to on either reading is just the claim that in illusory perceptions "the controlling sense" need not assent to the appearances, the upshots of phantasia. I think Schofield shares the misreading that I attribute to Nussbaum in the text.

Aristotle's account of illusory perceptions – a phenomenon that Aristotle explains by appeal to phantasia.

In an example from DA – one that parallels the example cited above from De Insomniis – Aristotle says that “things can also appear falsely (phainetai pseudê), when we have at the same time a true supposition about them, e.g. the sun appears (phainetai) a foot across, although we believe it to be bigger than the inhabited world” (428b2-4). The absurdity of thinking that mental images are anywhere involved in such an episode is brought out excellently by Nussbaum in the following reconstruction of an illusory perception.

To say the sun appears a foot across is not to claim that when we look at the sun we must have before us a mental picture that is a foot wide – or even a picture that we somehow internally measure and find to be a foot wide. There is no evidence that Aristotle wanted to make such an unilluminating claim. The person's phantasia has as its object the sun itself, and phantasia is his activity of seeing it as an object of a certain size. Judgment also has the real sun for its object, but, unlike phantasia, it requires experience and induction. It would be hard to find in this passage even the notion that the activity of phantasia necessarily involves episodes of picturing. All that needs to be added to the basic sense-experience is some interpretation of what is seen. (249)

Now, Aristotle does indeed tell us at DA 428a1-2 that “phantasia is that in virtue of which we say that a phantasma occurs to us.” And if one takes that claim to mark a necessary feature of any episode of phantasia – if one insists that an episode of phantasia just is an episode of a phantasma occurring to someone – then one will indeed want to deny that phantasmata are mental images, on pain of landing in the absurdity that Nussbaum exposes so well. But one may just as well deny that Aristotle means for the claim to mark anything like a defining feature of any episode of phantasia. If one can see one's way to denying that, then instead of being forced to try to produce passages where phantasmata cannot be construed as mental images, one can instead say that not

every episode of phantasia is an episode in which phantasmata appear. And one can say that, in particular, about illusory perceptions; they are indeed a phenomenon that Aristotle explains by appeal to phantasia, and yet in illusory perceptions phantasmata do not appear.

In the remainder I try to bring out just how plausible this approach is.

4. It is useful, first of all, to sketch one salient feature of Aristotle's account of veridical perception. The salient feature of Aristotle's account is that in veridical perception we can understand the world as making itself perceptually manifest to the perceiver. In cases of veridical perception, that is, the subject can simply take in how things are in the world, with nothing – a representation of how things are, say – mediating between world and subject.⁹ Thus Aristotle tells us at Metaphysics 981b10-11 that the senses give human perceivers the most authoritative knowledge (gnôsis) of particulars; he says that the senses are able to tell us, for instance, that fire is hot. This ability of the senses not only to detect some perceptible property in their immediate environment, but also to recognize that property as predicated of a certain object, or as coming from this direction rather than that one, constitutes, as Richard Sorabji says, “perception of propositions” (Sorabji 1992, 197; and see Cashdollar 1973). We need not balk at that way of putting things, since Sorabji means nothing more contentious than that in perceptions of that sort, someone can take in, she can for instance see, that something is predicated of something. Thus we are able to perceive, not only hot, white or sweet, but that fire is hot, that an object is white, that this is drink, that this is sweet, that bile is yellow, and so on. That Aristotle does indeed countenance this kind of perception, given the textual evidence, seems to me beyond dispute.¹⁰

⁹ That way of putting the matter is meant to echo John McDowell's way of expressing the same picture (though not with respect to Aristotle): an appearance that such-and-such is the case can simply be the fact that such-and-such is the case “making itself perceptually manifest to someone.” See McDowell 1998a, especially sect. 3. (All references are to the reprint.) And see McDowell 1994, *passim*, but especially, lecture II, sections 2 and 3. The extent to which McDowell's thinking has influenced the reading I recommend will be obvious to anyone familiar with McDowell's own work on perceptual experience.

¹⁰ See (respectively after the reference from the Metaphysics) DA 428b21-2, De Motu Animalium 701a32-3, Nicomachean Ethics 1147a25-30, and DA 425b2. Cashdollar also cites DA 418a16, 418a21-3, 425a25-7, 430b29-30; and Nicomachean Ethics 1113a1, 1149a35. Sorabji adds to Cashdollar's list Nicomachean Ethics 1118a20-3, 1170a29-b1; and De Insomniis 458b14-15, 462a3. There is, though, a question whether Aristotle regarded the cases he mentions as genuine cases of perception, as opposed to being merely the

With perception of propositions at our disposal, we can begin to see why according to Aristotle there is no object mediating between world and subject in cases of veridical perception. We have just seen that in perception one can take in – one can for instance see – that things are thus and so. But that things are thus and so is also something that can be the case. If we like, that things are thus and so can be part of the layout of external reality. Now we can attribute to Aristotle the view that veridical perceptions are unmediated glimpses of the world only if we can credit him with having had this thought: that the content of a veridical perception that things are thus and so is nothing short of the very fact that things are thus and so.¹¹ What would it be like for that to fail to happen?

To bring out what it would be for the content of a veridical perception to fall short of the fact whose upshot the perception is, I am going to sketch a familiar epistemological argument. (The argument enlists what John McDowell calls the “highest common factor” conception of our subjective epistemological condition.)¹² In an illusory perception, the appearance that things are thus and so is ex hypothesi compatible with there being no fact corresponding to the appearance. One is presented with a putative fact about the world; but this appearance is compatible with there

result of an inference of reason based on perception. That question is addressed by Sorabji, who writes that it “would be wrong to suppose that this propositional perception really involves an inference of reason merely on the ground that sense-qualities, like colour, are said to be essential (kath’ hautou) objects of perception, whereas the son of Diareos and the son of Cleon, who enter into propositions, are said to be coincidental sense-objects (kata sumbebêkos). . . . I have argued elsewhere that the reason why colour is said to be essential to sight is that sight is defined as the perception of light, shade and colour. By contrast the son of Diareos is not essentially related to colours seen, and hence not to sight. It is this that accounts for this being called a coincidental object of perception. There is no suggestion that he is perceived only indirectly by way of inference” (Sorabji 1992, 197; the paper to which Sorabji refers is Sorabji 1971). Both Stanford Cashdollar (1973, 164-167) and Deborah Modrak (1987, ch. 4, especially 69-70) join Sorabji in denying that perception of propositions involves an inference or reason. Cashdollar points out that – quite aside from the fact that the relevant texts explicitly attribute to perception the ability in question – there is no mention of nous in Aristotle’s account of kata sumbebêkos perception, that which would presumably have to do the inferring. And Modrak points out that there is no textual evidence for attributing to Aristotle a notion of perception so narrow that it precludes the sort of predication involved in perception of propositions.

¹¹ That should call to mind Wittgenstein’s remark: “When we say, and mean, that such-and-such is the case, we – and our meaning – do not stop anywhere short of the fact; but we mean: this – is – so.” (Philosophical Investigations, remark 95) McDowell discusses the remark in McDowell 1994, lecture II, sect. 3.

¹² McDowell emphasizes the grip that the “highest common factor” conception has on contemporary epistemology in McDowell 1998a sect. 3, and in McDowell 1994, lecture VI, sect. 3.

being no such fact. So, for instance, even though the sun looks a foot in diameter, the appearance is compatible with the sun's not being a foot in diameter. And one can seem to be forced to accept a similar conclusion about the appearances in veridical cases; one can seem to be forced to accept that since illusory cases are phenomenologically indistinguishable from veridical ones, it must be that in the veridical cases as well, a putative fact that presents itself to someone is compatible with there being no such fact. The thought is that the very same appearance that (now) occurs to someone in a veridical perception could have occurred to her even if things were not as they (now) appear. And if that is so, then it is hard to see how in veridical cases what one experiences is an unmediated glimpse of the layout of reality. If a veridical perception that things are thus and so is able to be compatible with things not being thus and so, then veridical cases must be instances in which the appearance interposes itself between world and subject. The content of the perception would therefore fall short of the fact itself, in the sense here intended.

This familiar epistemological argument stems from the distinctively modern anxieties that can bring one to question whether unmediated epistemological contact with external reality is so much as possible. They are not anxieties to which Aristotle himself was susceptible (see, e.g., Burnyeat 1982). It therefore seems to me entirely implausible that Aristotle would have given the argument even so much as a hearing. And that is already a reason to think that for Aristotle the content of a veridical perception that things are thus and so does not fall short of the very fact that things are thus and so. In what follows I proceed as though that account of veridical perception is indeed Aristotle's. For those who find this conclusion premature, it should be enough to register that the account of illusory perception that I recommend does not essentially rely on it; the argument that I present below (in section 6) stands independently.

5. If that account of veridical perception can indeed be correctly attributed to Aristotle, then the thought that phantasmata are present in cases of illusory perception should now begin to seem rather queer. We can see how that is so by drawing out a contrast between Aristotle's own theory of perception and two other theories of perception. The two theories which I have in mind are

these: a sense-datum theory of perception, and a theory which we can call a ‘naive realist’ theory of perception.¹³ According to sense-datum theorists there are, as it were, sense-data through and through perceptual experience. In veridical and illusory perceptions alike, what one perceives is not the world, nor any (material) object in the world. Rather, what one perceives are sense-data – what we can think of here as mental images. According to naive realists, by contrast, sense-data are present neither in veridical perception nor in illusory perception. By a careful attention to the uses of “looks,” “seems,” “appears,” and their cognates, naive realists are able to dismantle the arguments purporting to show that all cases of perception are cases in which what one perceives are sense-data.¹⁴ According to naive realists, veridical and illusory perceptions are both cases in which what one perceives are ordinary objects in the world, even if those objects do not always appear quite as they are.

Now we already have good reason to maintain that, according to Aristotle, nothing mediates between world and subject in cases of veridical perception. One’s perceiving that things are thus and so is simply to have the fact that things are thus and so make itself perceptually manifest to one in perception. But if that account accurately captures Aristotle’s considered view of the matter, then it must indeed be queer to think that when things go wrong – when appearances diverge from what is the case – phantasmata suddenly emerge. To highlight the queerness of that suggestion, consider the following familiar example of an illusory perception. From certain angles, as we know, a straight stick partially submerged in water looks bent. This is a case of an illusory perception in the sense characterized above, since if one were to assent to the content of one’s perception – that the stick is bent – one’s belief that the stick is bent would of course be false.¹⁵ But now consider what happens in a case in which one watches the stick as it is slowly submerged in the water. If phantasmata are present in every case in which phantasia is

¹³ By the latter I have in mind the view advanced in Austin 1962; and by the former I have in mind the position in Ayer 1940.

¹⁴ That of course is not to say that the naive realist has given a satisfactory account of those cases where sense-data or something like them must surely be present: for instance in cases of dreaming and hallucination. Those cases are precisely the ones in which Aristotle does maintain that phantasmata appear.

¹⁵ Of course one need not believe the appearance, as Aristotle, Austin and McDowell all concede. So, for instance, see again the sun example at DA 428b3-4.

operative, then what one sees as the stick is slowly being submerged in water is this: a stick . . . a stick . . . a stick . . . a phantasma.

The contrast that I wanted to draw out can now quite easily be seen. For whereas both sense-datum theorists and naive realists present uniform accounts of what one perceives in cases of both veridical and illusory perception, according to this account of perception, it is as if a veil or a movie screen suddenly drops between world and subject when appearances diverge from what is the case. When appearances diverge from what is the case, one's unmediated glimpse of the world suddenly retreats behind a veil of ideas. We are to picture the subject as being immediately confronted in illusory cases with an entity wholly different in kind from what she confronts in veridical cases. What she confronts in veridical cases is simply the fact that things are thus and so; and the fact that things are thus and so is ex hypothesi not a phantasma, nor is it anything like a phantasma.¹⁶ So the sudden emergence of phantasmata in cases of illusory perception would be queer in just this way.

We have, moreover, good reason to think that Aristotle thought it queer. For nowhere does Aristotle claim that what we perceive in illusory perceptions are phantasmata. When we see something that looks like a man, though indistinctly, we do not say that we see a phantasma of a man, but rather “that this appears to us to be a man” (phainetai touto hêmin anthrôpos) (DA 428a13-14).¹⁷ So given the account of veridical perception that we attributed to Aristotle above, it is indeed implausible to think that Aristotle held (what would be the queer view) that phantasmata are present in cases of illusory perception. One need not look for phantasmata in every case in which phantasia is operative.

6. The argument just presented may seem inconclusive. It proceeds from the claim that in veridical perceptions an appearance that things are thus and so is not something that falls short of

¹⁶ As Aristotle points out, phantasmata can be false: they can diverge from what is the case.

¹⁷ Whether the case is illusory is left open, but that shows that one need not revise the claim for cases in which indistinct perceptions are illusory; we would still not say that we see a phantasma of a man, but rather that this appears to us to be a man.

the fact itself.¹⁸ From there, the argument claims that the sudden emergence of mental images in illusory perceptions must be very queer indeed. The argument can seem inconclusive because of a temptation to use it as a reductio of the account of veridical perception attributed to Aristotle above. That could be accomplished if the presence of phantasmata in illusory perceptions could be established independently. The claim would then be that queerness does indeed emerge, but that it emerges when someone moves from a perceptual state in which an appearance is deceptive, to a state in which an appearance is veridical; it would be queer to think that in veridical perceptions one suddenly achieves an unmediated glimpse of reality. By my own showing – since I have just employed the argument moving in the other direction – the reductio argument would indeed be persuasive. It would indeed preclude the account of veridical perceptions that I have been attributing to Aristotle. But I do not think that the crucial premise for such a reductio can be established. The premise cannot be established because Aristotle seems to recognize the explanatory uselessness of positing mental images in illusory perceptions. And this provides a second problem for the view that phantasmata are present in cases of illusory perception.

That mental images do no work whatever in explaining illusory perceptions has been demonstrated convincingly by J. L. Austin with respect to sense-data (Austin 1962). Moreover, the considerations that Austin advances in his attack on sense-data seem to be considerations that are also advanced by Aristotle. We can rehearse an argument that featured as one of Austin's targets by returning to the example considered above. From certain angles, a straight stick partially submerged in water looks bent. But then what one sees when one looks at a stick partially submerged in water – since what one sees looks bent, but the stick itself is not bent – must be something other than the stick itself. The conclusion is that what one perceives in such cases must be a kind of mental image or sense-datum. In response to that sort of argument, Austin simply points out how common refraction is, that only a very young child could be fooled

¹⁸ Any talk of appearances in veridical perception may seem inappropriate, since Aristotle says explicitly that we do not say that things appear thus and so when the senses are functioning properly. But while we do not tend to say this, it is nevertheless true that in veridical perceptions there is the appearance that things are thus and so. The availability of the very general term "phainomena" is all one needs to justify speaking in this way. (The note responds to a comment of Ronald Polansky.)

by what she sees. Thus he writes: “We may perhaps be prepared to agree that the stick looks bent; but then we can see that it’s partly submerged in water, so that is exactly how we should expect it to look” (Austin 1962, 26). So while it is true that if one were to believe that a straight stick partially submerged in water is bent one’s belief would of course be false, what one nevertheless perceives when one looks at a straight stick partially submerged in water is: a straight stick partially submerged in water. Bringing in any kind of mental image in order to explain what one sees is therefore completely unnecessary. And that conclusion holds also for any other case of illusory perception to which sense-datum theorists want to call our attention.

Now it seems that Aristotle is endorsing precisely the same position as Austin when he offers the sun example at DA 428b3-5. Recall that there Aristotle tells us that “things can also appear falsely (phainetai pseudê), when we have at the same time a true supposition about them; e.g. the sun appears (phainetai) a foot across, although we believe it to be bigger than the inhabited world.” The immediate context of this passage is Aristotle’s explanation of why phantasia is not the same as belief (doxa); but as we saw above in Nussbaum’s elaboration on the passage (section 3), it is absurd to think that mental images are anywhere involved in the episode that Aristotle mentions. With that in mind, we can begin to appreciate how close Aristotle’s understanding of such an episode must be to Austin’s. At least part of the point of Aristotle’s example is that there is no reason to insert a mental image in cases where appearances can be misleading. For in the sun example, too, what one sees is precisely what one expects to see.¹⁹ There is therefore no reason to attribute to Aristotle the view that what one sees in such cases are phantasmata, even though illusory cases of perception are episodes of phantasia. The introduction of mental images in order to explain illusory perceptions is indeed unnecessary, and Aristotle himself does not appeal to mental images in his own account of that phenomenon.

¹⁹ Compare Aristotle’s example with one of Austin’s: “‘The moon looks no bigger than a sixpence’ – it doesn’t look as if it is no bigger than a sixpence” (Austin 1962, 41).

7. We are now in a position to see why Nussbaum need not stand “Aristotle’s basic interest in appearing” in opposition to what she calls “the decaying-sense theory” of DA iii.3; we are in a position to see why one can appreciate Aristotle’s basic interest in appearing, even while one acknowledges the passages where Aristotle describes episodes of phantasia as kinêseis resulting from actual sense perceptions. Phantasia then emerges as a single, unified psychological faculty, in spite of the wide variety of contexts in which it is employed. It does so, as Nussbaum emphasizes, precisely because of Aristotle’s general interest in appearing; but that general interest does not, as Nussbaum also thinks, stand opposed to the physiological account of phantasia that Aristotle offers.

I said above that Nussbaum’s own strategy for interpreting what Aristotle says about phantasia is to avoid focusing solely on the discussions of it in DA iii.3 and in parts of the PN. According to Nussbaum: “If we grant that the final paragraph of iii.3 represents Aristotle’s canonical discussion of phantasia, we will be forced to find images in many passages where the context alone would not indicate their presence” (251). But the relevant section of the final paragraph of DA iii.3 says only this: “If, then, nothing else has the stated characteristics except phantasia, and this is what was said, phantasia will be a movement (kinêsis) taking place as the result of actual sense perception” (428b30-429a3). Nussbaum therefore seems to equate, or at least to relate very closely, the presence of the kinêsis resulting from perception and the occurrence of a mental image. But that suggestion should seem suspicious on its face. It should seem suspicious precisely because the residual kinêsis in question – the physiological basis for an episode of phantasia – is a remnant of the kinêsis that takes place in actual sense perception. Aristotle tells us that perception is a kind of kinêsis (DA 416b33-34); and he explains the physiological basis of episodes of phantasia in terms of residual kinêseis that resemble actual perceptions (DA 428b14, 429a5). So a similar sort of kinêsis is present both in actual cases of perception and in episodes of phantasia. But since mental images, even on Nussbaum’s showing, do not appear in actual cases of perception, the mere presence of the relevant sort of kinêsis in

perceptual experience (whether veridical or illusory) cannot be sufficient for the presence of a mental image.

What we have then is this. Aristotle does indeed offer an account of the physiological occurrence that he takes to be a necessary condition for an episode of phantasia. (We know that the physiological occurrence is necessary for an episode of phantasia because Aristotle explains episodes of phantasia solely by appeal to kinêseis resulting from actual perceptions.) But the physiological account does not in turn necessitate an interpretation according to which, as a result of any such occurrence, a mental image occurs to someone. Since a similar sort of kinêsis is necessary for both veridical and illusory perceptions, the presence of such a kinêsis is not sufficient for the occurrence of a mental image. The “decaying-sense theory” of DA iii.3 does not therefore threaten an appreciation of “Aristotle’s basic interest in appearing,” in the way that Nussbaum suggests. One need not stand them in opposition to each other.

8. I now want to consider a likely objection to the account that I have been recommending.

According to the objection, my reading of Aristotle’s account of illusory perception threatens the very coherence of Aristotle’s overall treatment of perception. For it seems that the mere acknowledgment that appearances can diverge from what is the case undermines the account of veridical perception that I attributed to Aristotle above. The problem stems from the “familiar epistemological argument” that I outlined. The crucial premise of the argument was that in illusory cases, the appearance that things are thus and so is ex hypothesi compatible with there being no fact identical to that appearance. And the conclusion was that the same must be true in veridical cases; the appearance in veridical perceptions must also be compatible with there being no fact identical to it. The content of a veridical perception thus falls short of the fact whose upshot the perception is. But then Aristotle’s account, on my reading of it, must be flawed. Granted that, as I suggested above, Aristotle may not have found the “highest common factor” conception so much as intelligible; still, the conception is intelligible to us. And, under its influence, the reading of Aristotle’s account of perception that I have recommended can seem

threatened. If we are tempted by the “highest common factor” conception, then things are just so much worse for Aristotle.

That conception of our epistemological condition is not however compulsory. McDowell, for instance, rightly inveighs against it. His response to the “highest common factor” conception occurs in his own discussion of how concepts mediate the relation between minds and the world (McDowell 1994, 1998a). But the response can certainly be put to use here. It can be exploited to defend the reading I have recommended against the putative problem generated for it by the familiar epistemological argument. The central idea used to deal with the problem is the idea of a “disjunctive” account of perception:

But suppose we say – not at all unnaturally – that an appearance that such-and-such is the case can be either a mere appearance or the fact that such-and-such is the case making itself perceptually manifest to someone. As before, the object of experience in deceptive cases is mere appearance. But we are not to accept that in the non-deceptive cases too the object of experience is a mere appearance, and hence something that falls short of the fact itself. On the contrary, we are to insist that the appearance that is presented to one in those cases is a matter of the fact being disclosed to the experiencer. So appearances are no longer conceived as in general intervening between the experiencing subject and the world. (McDowell 1998a, 387)²⁰

The “highest common factor” conception of our epistemological condition stems from a misguided aim of traditional (post-Cartesian) epistemology. The aim is to start from the representational data of consciousness, and to work out from these to explain how one can in perception have genuine glimpses of the world. As opposed to this, Aristotle begins by accepting that perceptual experiences allow one to take in the way things are, and he explains cases where

²⁰ McDowell’s footnote to the first sentence of the paragraph reads: “In classical Greek, ‘. . . phainetai sophos ôn [word for word: he appears wise being] means he is manifestly wise, and phainetai sophos einai [word for word: he appears wise to be], he seems to be wise . . .’: William W. Goodwin, A Greek Grammar, p. 342.” For a positive argument endorsing the disjunctive account, see Snowdon 1981.

things go wrong – cases where the appearances would be mere appearances – in terms of how one’s perceptual capacities diverge from paradigm cases, cases where one simply takes in the way things are. There will accordingly be no need to try to work one’s way out to an external world, equipped with only the data of consciousness. That line of argument accords with how Aristotle, as it seems, can be unconcerned to answer the distinctively modern epistemological worry. So Aristotle’s account of veridical perceptions can indeed be seen to be consistent with the account of illusory perceptions that I have been attributing to him. The reading of Aristotle that I recommend can indeed resist the “highest common factor” conception of our epistemological condition.

Now this explicit appeal to McDowell’s own account of perception may very well precipitate the objection that the reading of Aristotle that I recommend is just one more contemporary account of perception (epistemology, philosophy of mind) made to seem found in an Aristotelian text that is notoriously susceptible to wildly divergent interpretations. But the question, as it seems to me, is not yet settled whether the direction of influence may not go the other way around; the question whether McDowell’s own account is Aristotelian by origin is, as it seems to me, still open.^{21 22}

²¹ That response to the objection may seem implausible in light of the fact that the philosopher who commands center stage in McDowell’s own account of perceptual experience is, not Aristotle, but Kant. And yet McDowell remarks (in reference to a Humean naturalism that can seem inevitable to us): “It may be objected that we do not need reflection on Kant to see our way past this; by my own showing, reflection on Aristotle should suffice. But modern readers will always be prone to misinterpret Aristotle if they read him without first immunizing themselves against the damaging effects of modern philosophy; and I do not think that we can do that without working our way through Kant’s thinking, realizing what went wrong, but recognizing what was right” (McDowell 1998b, 179).

²² Thanks are due to Andreas Anagnostopoulos, Mariana Anagnostopoulos, Hayden Anderson, Tim Byrne, Ronald Polansky, and an anonymous commentator for *Ancient Philosophy*. Special thanks are due to Michael Loux, without whose advice and encouragement the paper would not have been completed.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Austin, J. L. 1962. Sense and Sensibilia. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Ayer, A. J. 1940. The Foundations of Empirical Knowledge. New York: Macmillan.
- Burnyeat, M. F. 1982. "Idealism and Greek Philosophy: What Descartes Saw and Berkeley Missed" 19-50 in Godfrey Vesey ed. Idealism Past and Present. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Cashdollar, Stanford. 1973. "Aristotle's Account of Incidental Perception" Phronêsis 18: 156-175.
- Everson, Stephen. 1997. Aristotle on Perception. Oxford: Clarendon Press.
- Hamlyn, D. W. 1968. Aristotle's De Anima. translation and commentary. Oxford: Clarendon Press.
- Hett, W. S. 1957. Aristotle: On the Soul; Parva Naturalia; On Breath. text and translation. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.
- Hicks, R. D. 1907. Aristotle, De Anima. translation and commentary. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- McDowell, John. 1994. Mind and World. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.
- McDowell, John. 1998a. "Criteria, Defeasibility, and Knowledge" 369-394 in his Meaning, Knowledge, and Reality. Cambridge: Harvard University Press. [reprinted from Proceedings of the British Academy (1982) 455-479.]
- McDowell, John. 1998b. "Two Sorts of Naturalism" 149-179 in Rosalind Hursthouse, Gavin Lawrence, and Warren Quinn edd. Virtues and Reasons: Philippa Foot and Moral Theory. Oxford: Clarendon Press.
- Modrak, Deborah. 1987. Aristotle: The Power of Perception. Chicago: Chicago University Press.
- Nussbaum, Martha. 1978. "The Role of Phantasia in Aristotle's Explanation of Action" 221-269 in her Aristotle's De Motu Animalium. text, translation, commentary, and critical essays. Princeton: Princeton University Press.

- Schofield Malcolm. 1992. "Aristotle on the Imagination" 249-277 in M. Nussbaum and A. O. Rorty edd. Essays on Aristotle's De Anima. Oxford: Clarendon Press.
- Snowdon, Paul. 1981. "Perception, Vision and Causation" Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society 81: 175-192.
- Sorabji, Richard. 1971. "Aristotle on Demarcating the Five Senses" Philosophical Review 80: 55-79.
- Sorabji, Richard. 1972. Aristotle on Memory. text, translation, and commentary. Providence: Brown University Press.
- Sorabji, Richard. 1992. "Intentionality and Physiological Processes: Aristotle's Theory of Sense-Perception" 195-225 in M. Nussbaum and A. O. Rorty edd. Essays on Aristotle's De Anima. Oxford: Clarendon Press.
- Wedin, Michael. 1988. Mind and Imagination in Aristotle. New Haven: Yale University Press.