THEMISTIUS AND THE TRADITIONAL INTERPRETATION OF ARISTOTLE'S THEORY OF PHANTASIA

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I

According to the standard interpretation, Aristotle's theory of phantasia is an account of mental images that are formed from sense perception. The major textual basis for this reading is a passage at the end of De Anima III.3 (428b10–30), but this reading has been applied to passages elsewhere in the corpus where Aristotle's intentions are far less clear. Several modern scholars have adopted this interpretation, or variants of it, but its origins lie in antiquity. If we may rely on Priscian's report of Theophrastus' psychological theory it can be found in the first generation after Aristotle, but the earliest systematic analysis of phantasia in terms of mental imagery is that offered by the Peripatetic commentator Alexander of Aphrodisias (c. 200 AD) in his essay on Aristotelian psychology, the de anima. Subsequently this reading was espoused by another Peripatetic commentator, Themistius, and then, with some modifications in the supporting psychological theory, by the neoplatonic commentators on Aristotle's De Anima.

In the present paper I shall offer a critical review of some of the passages from these Greek commentators in which the traditional interpretation of phantasia appears. I shall focus on Themistius as a representative figure since he is more directly concerned with exegesis than is Alexander, who is engaged in an ambitious reconstruction of Aristotle's psychological theory. Also, some of Themistius' views were known to a later neoplatonist commentator (Stephanus of Alexandria) who criticised them in a revealing fashion. From this historical inquiry I hope to provide some indirect support for the reinterpretation of Aristotle's account of phantasia advocated in different ways in two recent studies by M. Schofield and M. Nussbaum. Both scholars have questioned the traditional view of phantasia as involving mental images or some exclusively sensory experience. The position that they attack was originated by the Greek Aristotelian commentators; there may be more than historical interest in exploring the difficulties presented by an early version of this influential interpretation.

II PHANTASIA AND PERCEPTION: STEPHANUS AND THEMISTIUS

In the third book of Philoponus' commentary on Aristotle's De Anima (generally held to be the work of the sixth century commentator Stephanus of Alexandria) we find two brief references to Themistius' interpretation of Aristotle's theory of phantasia. In the first Stephanus criticises Themistius for holding that
because the activity of phantasia depended on sense-perception (aisthēsis) as an intermediary, it was therefore not only active “subsequent to perceptions” (meta tas aisthēseis), but “simultaneously with them” (hama autais). He adds that Themistius reached this conclusion because phantasia, on that earlier commentator’s view, received its imprints (tupoi) from perception simultaneously rather than in the manner of an inanimate receptacle. These remarks all come from a passage in which Stephanus is engaged in a lengthy reconstruction of Aristotle’s account of phantasia on the basis of De An. III.3 428b10ff.11

His second reference to Themistius occurs in his note on 428b27. Here Aristotle claims that where the special objects of perception (idia aistheta) are concerned phantasia is true “in the presence of perception”; Stephanus reports that Themistius took this passage as support for his view that phantasia occurred “simultaneously with perception” (hama te aisthēsei).12 We are presumably meant to recall Stephanus’ earlier unfavourable judgement on this view.

Stephanus’ report seems to be loosely based on texts in Themistius’ paraphrase of the De Anima. In his general reconstruction of Aristotle’s account of phantasia Themistius notes that it is difficult to distinguish between phantasia (i.e. the faculty of phantasia confined to images derived from perception) and aisthēsis where these occur simultaneously.13 He also distinguishes phantasia from the kind of imprinting that inanimate bodies undergo, though he does not use this (as Stephanus claims) as evidence of the simultaneity of phantasia and aisthēsis, but as part of an argument to show that phantasia involves an activity focussed on mental images.14 Finally, Themistius paraphrases De An. 428b27–30 in terms that show that he thought that phantasia occurred simultaneously with perception, as indeed Aristotle himself allows.15 We shall shortly consider these references in the whole context of Themistius’ reading of De An. III.3. For now I think we can conclude that Stephanus has simplified Themistius’ discussion of phantasia into the thesis that phantasia and aisthēsis can occur simultaneously, when this is in fact only an aside in his reconstruction of Aristotle’s account. C. Steel’s recent attempt to differentiate between Stephanus’ report and Themistius’ paraphrase as part of his wider case for the existence of lost Themistian commentaries does not therefore seem convincing;16 both Steel’s general thesis and his use of the report of Themistius’ view on phantasia have been well criticised by H.J. Blumenthal.17

The genuinely interesting aspect of Stephanus’ report is the exegetical problem raised by the notion of phantasia occurring simultaneously with perception. Stephanus could regard this as impossible since on his view the activities of phantasia occurred only when sense perception had ceased. During perception the most that could happen was that images were stored up for this later use.18 Yet Stephanus himself could also concede that such “later” use might occur while perception was continuing, as with the prolonged perception of the same object; here images are formed and apprehended as we look at something.19 But this simultaneity of image and object is just the difficulty about associating images with phantasia that Themistius was trying to point out. Stephanus would have
recognised this had he read the earlier commentator’s words in context. For Themistius, like every ancient commentator, defined phantasia as an image-having faculty of the soul, the operations of which occurred in the absence of perception. In the next section we shall review this commentator’s reading of Aristotle’s major discussion of phantasia in De An. III.3. This will show that the simultaneity of phantasia and aisthēsis is not the only problem presented by an interpretation of phantasia as an image-having faculty of the soul.

III THEMISTIUS AND DE ANIMA III.3

Aristotle’s discussion of phantasia in De An. III.3 falls into two main parts. In the first he is concerned with the relation between phantasia and other mental activities (perception, belief, and knowledge), while in the second he offers a programmatic account of the relation between phantasia and sense-perception. It is the second of these discussions that has traditionally inspired commentators, ancient and modern, to attribute to Aristotle the doctrine that phantasia involves mental images that result from the activity of perception. We shall review Themistius’ contribution to this exegetical effort before showing how he applies the results to texts in the first part of De An. III.3.

III.1

In the traditional interpretation of phantasia commentators read a great deal into Aristotle’s abstract description (428b 10–16) of the relation between phantasia and aisthēsis in terms of a movement transmitted from the latter to the former via an intermediary; the result is supposedly the formation of an image, or what has often been characterised as a form of “decayed sense”. This reconstruction is fortified by reference to accounts of image formation offered in the De Memoria and the De Insomniis, although in neither place is Aristotle identifying phantasia with a process of image formation. The conclusion of this interpretation is that phantasia is a sensory faculty of the soul (as the ancient commentators characterised it) operating exclusively with the “residues” or “traces” of perception, and though modern commentators have not adopted the language of faculty psychology they have endorsed the general principle of this reading. Through reviewing Themistius’ contribution to this tradition we shall see that this particular conception of phantasia neither fits with De An. 428b10–16, when that passage is read in context, nor with passages from the earlier part of De An. III.3.

Themistius reads 428b10–16 initially as a description of the formation of images; this leads to an account of phantasia as a faculty that operates when perception ceases, or when the objects of perception (aisthēta) are absent. His remark about the simultaneity of phantasia and aisthēsis that offended Stephanus is a query about the validity of this account. He says that “when the object of perception is present and both are evoked at the same time—I mean the simultaneity of both aisthēsis and phantasia—then it is difficult to discover the
difference between these two faculties; for the two then seem to be active with respect to the same object (*hupokeimenon*) and at the same time." His solution is to suggest that the two faculties operate differently in that *phantasia* has as its object a form (*eidos*) imprinted by perception, and analogous to the object of perception (the *aistheton*) proprietary to that primary faculty. In that way a distinction between faculties is maintained while their simultaneity is still allowed. But Themistius seems dissatisfied, and reiterates his point that it is difficult to distinguish simultaneously operating faculties; he falls back on the principle that "in most cases" (*epi pollon*) *phantasia* continues after perception has ceased, and is by that token readily identified.

Themistius' difficulties are instructive. He wants *phantasia* to be an independent faculty of the soul, and yet draws on an Aristotelian text in which it seems to be an instant duplication of perception. Images are then an embarrassment until perception has ceased, granted that they cannot be integrated into an analysis of perception itself. And this is ruled out by a simplistic contrast between "internal" images and "external" *aisthēta*. Thus if *phantasia* is an image-having faculty it will regularly coincide with perception. Aristotle more sensibly regards the formation of images as a selective process; not everyone will retain images to the same extent, and not all perceptions will leave the same impression. At the same time he allowed that sense-perception could consolidate itself in the form of "sense images" (*aisthēmatum*) that do not however survive beyond perception, though they have a causal role in the formation of residual sensory data. But at no point in his discussion of images does Aristotle identify *phantasia* as a special faculty for the retention and apprehension of images. This allows him to talk about *phantasia* being simultaneous with *aisthēsis* without the embarrassment felt by Themistius. Moreover he does so in the very passage from which this commentator and others have drawn their account of *phantasia* as an image-having faculty of the soul.

Thus De An. 428b10–16 that supposedly contains an account of *phantasia* as involving the formation of images is succeeded (at 428b17–30) by a comprehensive definition of true and false *phantasia* based on the conception of *phantasia* as a movement derived from actual perception. Here we find *phantasia* said to be true and false in ways that mirror the corrigibility of *aisthēsis* with regard to the different *aistheton* (the special, common, and incidental objects); *phantasia* may be false in varying degrees of likelihood, depending on the *aistheton* involved and on whether or not perception is simultaneously occurring. It is the latter point that we must emphasise for the moment, for it surely suggests that images could only be introduced for the category of *phantasia* that is not simultaneous with perception. That implication would not suit a commentator like Themistius who associates all cases of *phantasia* with mental images. In paraphrasing 428b27–30 he acknowledges that when perception is occurring false *phantasia* will simply reproduce the falsity of the perception, while in the absence of perception error will be due to *phantasia* retaining imperfectly represented images.
about how phantasia can be simultaneous with perception at all, understandably, since the Aristotelian text shows that that is a scholastic and not a genuinely exegetical issue. Phantasia simultaneous with perception at 427b27–30 simply has nothing to do with a faculty of phantasia and its store of proprietary images.

In fact we may conclude that since the original definition of phantasia as a movement derived from perception yields an account of true and false phantasia in which phantasia can be simultaneous with perception, then at no point in the whole passage does Aristotle intend us to infer a theory of phantasia as either an image-having faculty, or as some peculiar post-perceptual form of sensory experience. The notion of phantasia as a movement derived from perception has too readily been given a physiological interpretation when it may at most be an analogy designed to show that sense-perception is a necessary condition of phantasia, whether or not phantasia involves mental images. This is exactly the level of generality necessary for the subsequent account of true and false phantasia as possible both in the presence and the absence of sense perception.

III.2
If the major text on which the traditional interpretation of phantasia is based can be satisfactorily read without introducing a general theory of phantasia as an image-having faculty, or as involving any special form of post-perceptual sensory experience, it will follow that the interpretation of less programmatic passages in terms of such a theory is also thrown in doubt. We can see this by looking at Themistius' treatment of some passages from the earlier part of De An. III.3.

In one place (428a12–15) Aristotle distinguishes between phantasia and aisthesis by claiming that when we are perceiving something accurately we do not say that "this appears to be a person" (phainetai touto hēmīn anthropos), but only talk this way when our perception is indistinct. In his paraphrase Themistius uses the verb phantazesthai to describe what it is for something to appear to us; his earlier use of the same verb shows that he is referring to the process by which we form and attend to images. Yet the Aristotelian passage can hardly be read this way. If saying "this appears" of an indistinctly perceived object is a case of phantasia, then it cannot plausibly be a report about an image, without Aristotle going a long way to meet modern theories of sense data. As Schofield has suggested phantasia here is an expression of sceptical doubt, and this rather than any theory of mental imagery captures what Aristotle would subsequently characterise as "phantasia in the presence of perception".

In another passage (428b2–9) Aristotle offers a distinction between phantasia and belief by analysing the case in which the sun appears (phainetai) to be a foot wide, although we believe it to be much larger. Themistius' paraphrase represents this case of phantasia as an "imprint and trace of perception"; but here, too, images seem irrelevant to Aristotle's meaning. Minimally the "appearance" of the sun represents the fact that it is not being veridically perceived, just as
elsewhere (427b21–24) cases of phantasia are compared to pictorial representations that we view unemotionally because we do not believe that they are real, or just as the assertion "phantai" of something indistinctly perceived is an expression of doubt and involves the withholding of belief. Even if it could be shown that Aristotle thought that in all these cases mental images had a role to play, this would still not explain what he meant by phantasia. Themistius’ attempts to insert images into these passages help us establish this point.46

IV

But what Themistius, like all the ancient commentators, does not help us do is reach a positive account of Aristotle’s concept of phantasia. This is not the place to attempt that project except to note an issue that arises directly from the Aristotelian material that we have been considering.

In the passage at 428b10–30 Aristotle, as we saw, regards phantasia as somehow mirroring perception and therefore being true and false, even if it seems to be particularly liable to be false (as with distant objects of perception, 428b29–30). Now the notion of any case of phantasia being true seems awkward when elsewhere in De An. III.3, as we have just seen, phantasia can identify sensory experiences that justify doubt and disbelief. Indeed it is only Aristotle’s elaborate and never-repeated attempt (at 428b16–30) to correlate phantasia with the differing degrees of corrigibility found in the trichotomy of aisthēta (simple, common, and incidental) that leads him to this notion of true phantasia.47 In the De Insomniis, however, he manages to repeat the very definition of phantasia as a movement derived from perception on which the correlation at De An. 428b16–30 is based, but in a context in which phantasia is associated only with deviant, or non-standard, sensory experiences (dreams, misperceptions, the illusions of the sick or deranged).48 This suggests that the programme at De An. 428b16–30 can be regarded as a short-lived experiment,49 while the picture of phantasia emerging from the De Insomniis, and other texts in De An. III.3, is his primary account.50 For our purpose, though, it is enough to note that this account spans both cases that involve images and those that simply involve instances of unusual sense perception; it is therefore further evidence that images are inessential to the definition of phantasia. The passage from the De Insomniis (cf. note 48) meanwhile confirms that the definition of phantasia as a movement derived from perception, from which the account of phantasia as involving mental images was derived, could be used to identify something other than the sensory nature of phantasia.

But if that “something other” is just an association between phantasia and dubitable sensory experiences it will hardly provide Aristotle with a satisfactory theory of phantasia. Elsewhere he clearly believes that phantasia can play a positive role in thinking and practical reasoning,51 and for this programme he needs a more generous concept of phantasia than one that identifies sensory experiences from which belief is normally withheld. The recent papers by
Schofield and Nussbaum mentioned at the outset have offered differing suggestions for endowing Aristotle's concept of *phantasia* with the content that would allow it to play such a positive role, whether in triggering desire and action, or in an account of thinking. Their views cannot be explored here, but this primarily historical inquiry can end by noting that the project of establishing a comprehensive theory of *phantasia* for Aristotle becomes legitimate once the traditional association between *phantasia* and mental images is eliminated. I have challenged the major evidence on which that association was founded, since even the most recent scholarship has left it unquestioned, and has thus maintained the impression that at some point Aristotle did identify *phantasia* as a quasi-perceptual form of sensory experience. My task could have been accomplished without the help of the Greek commentator Themistius, but the interpretation that he upheld has been so influential that it deserved to be tracked to one of its earliest lairs.

**NOTES**

Notes on References: I shall refer to the volumes of the *Commentaria in Aristotelem Graeca* (*CAG*) (Berlin 1883–1907) by the title of the Aristotelian work, and the page and line number. The following editions of the *De Anima* will be identified by authors' names: G. Rodier, *Aristote: Traité de l’Âme*, 2 vols. (Paris 1900), and R.D. Hicks, *Aristotle: De Anima* (Cambridge 1907; reprinted Amsterdam 1965).

1. See Sect. III below for examples.
3. Alexander, *de an.* (at Supplementum Aristotelicum II, ed. I. Bruns, Berlin 1892), 66.9–73.13 (note especially 68.4–71.5).
5. On the whole topic of the neoplatonist commentators' treatment of *phantasia* see H.J. Blumenthal, "Neoplatonic Interpretations of Aristotle on Phantasia", *Review of Metaphysics* 31 (1977) 242–257. On Stephanus see sect. II below. For Simplicius see *De An.* (*CAG* XI, ed. M. Hayduck 1882), 213.23–214.27. The Neoplatonists differed from Aristotle in seeing *phantasia* as a faculty of the human soul (they were not interested in its biological status as a faculty possessed by animals), and from earlier exeges in locating images in *pneuma*, a substance that they regarded as the physical basis of the sensory soul (see Simplic. *De An.* 214.2–4; Philoponus, *De An.* [*CAG* XV, ed. M. Hayduck 1887] 158.15–20).

6. A great deal of relevant evidence is gathered by M.W. Bundy in his study *The Theory of the Imagination in Classical and Medieval Thought* (Illinois Studies in Language and Literature XII: 2–3, Urbana 1927), chs. III, IV, and VII, but it is not treated as exegetical material.

7. I shall discuss Alexander's account of *phantasia* in another paper.


16. C. Steel, “Des Commentaires d'Aristote par Themistius?” Revue Philosophique de Louvain 71 (1973) 669–680, at 673–674. Steel of course admits that Themistius asserts the simultaneity of phantasias and aisthésis (in the passages cited in notes 12 and 14). He however (1) denies that Themistius uses the argument that phantasias is not a passive recipient but grasps sense-impressions immediately, and (2) claims that Themistius does not use De An. 428b27 “a l'appui de sa thèse”. Regarding (1) I think that Stephanus has simply misread the passage at Themistius 92.16–23, and misrepresented it as a reason for that commentator's admission of simultaneous phantasias and aisthésis. As for (2), Themistius has no “thèse” regarding the simultaneity of phantasias and aisthésis; he merely sees it as a problem arising within his overall reconstruction of phantasias as a post-perceptual image-having faculty; see sect. III below.

17. “Photius on Themistius (Cod. 74): Did Themistius write Commentaries on Aristotle?” Hermes 107 (1979) 168–182. At p. 172 Blumenthal concedes too much to Steel in thinking that he is correct not to find evidence that phantasias is “active” in Themistius. Cf. Them. De An. 92. 7–9, and 92.21–22, for references to phantasias “being active” (ἐνέργειαν), or “arriving at activity” (αἴ με ἐνεργείας προοδοῦ). The latter is part of the very passage (92.16–23) that distinguishes the activity of phantasias from the passive imprinting received by inanimate bodies, and that I have suggested Stephanus has misread (preceding note). Cf. Alexander de An. 68.30; 69.8–16, 15–17; 70.5–6, 22–24, for earlier references to the activity of phantasias, and note especially 72.5–13 (cf. 68.10–21) for essentially Themistius' point, that image-having for a faculty of the soul is more complex than just physical imprinting. Stephanus need not then have read Themistius neoplatonistically, as Blumenthal suggests, to have arrived at a notion of phantasias as active.

19. De An. 508.32–509.2. Stephanus presents this as an aporia; his exact solution is that the original perception (ἀπόρη θήκα, 508.35) from which the image was derived has ceased when phantasias becomes active. For Themistius’ thoughts on the simultaneity of image and object of perception see sect. III below; he was dissatisfied with the kind of solution that Stephanus accepted. Aristotle, it may be worth noting, only identifies the case of an after-image being derived from the absence of perception (e.g. dreams), just one of the criteria for distinguishing phantasias from perception. The traditional interpretation would work if this were the only criterion. Cf. Alexander’s remarks about the aisthēron being absent when phantasias occurs (e.g. de an. 69.10–11, 15). Themistius, De An. 92.1–3 admits that the distinction between phantasias and aisthésis is clear when aisthēta are absent. Unlike his predecessor he worried about cases where they could be present.

20. “Image-having” seems more appropriate than “imagining”. Aristotle identifies imagination in the form of free visualisation at De An. 111.3, 427b16–27, but whether, as Schofield has argued (paper cited note 8), this passage can be used in interpreting Aristotle’s discussion of other cases of phantasias is at least questionable (cf. note 52 below). As far as Themistius and the ancient commentators are concerned, the “activity” of the faculty of phantasias is primarily a means of retaining images that are received from perception, and not of structuring them independently, as De An. 427b16–27 envisages.

21. Aristotle, De An. 428a6–8 made the fact that something could “appear” (ἐμφανεῖται) in the absence of perception (e.g. dreams), just one of the criteria for distinguishing phantasias from perception. The traditional interpretation would work if this were the only criterion. Cf. Alexander’s remarks about the aisthēron being absent when phantasias occurs (e.g. de an. 69.10–11, 15). Themistius, De An. 92.1–3 admits that the distinction between phantasias and aisthésis is clear when aisthēta are absent. Unlike his predecessor he worried about cases where they could be present.

22. 427b27–428b9. Also relevant is 427b16–27, though this may be from an earlier version of the chapter, as 427b27 seems to mark a new beginning.

23. 428b10–429a2. Undoubtedly the assumption that this passage is offering a definition of phantasias has accounted for its influence; yet nowhere does Aristotle say that the description of phantasias as a movement derived from actual perception is any more of a definition than “that by which a phantasma occurs”, at 428a1–2 where perception is not mentioned.

24. R. D. Hicks (on 428b10) noted that this description recalled Physics 256a4ff. Alexander (de an. 69.20–25) seems to have recognised this, and identified Aristotle’s hand that moves a stone via a stick with the movement transmitted by perception to the faculty of phantasias via

25. Rodier (on 428b 11) cites Alexander de an. 68.4–6 (a description of image formation (with approval; indeed this whole note shows great sympathy towards the Greek commentators. Recently D.A. Rees has claimed that at 428b10ff. “Aristotle is simply [sic] considering mental images”: see “Aristotle's Treatment of Phantasia,” in Essays in Ancient Greek Philosophy, ed. J.P. Anton and G.L. Kustas (Albany 1971), 491–504 at 499. M. Schofield (article cited note 8) speaks of this passage giving an account of “causal traces of actual perceptions” (p. 102). The term “trace” recalls the use of ἡγος by ancient commentators to describe the imprint supposedly left by perception: see Alexander, de an. 72.11, and Themistius De An. 92.1.

26. J. Freudenthal, Über den Begriff des Wores ΦΑΝΤΑΣΙΑ bei Aristoteles (Göttingen 1863) 24 with n. I seems to have been the first to associate this passage with Thomas Hobbes’ remark about imagination being “the decay of sense in men waking.” Cope’s edition of Aristotle’s Rhetoric (Cambridge 1877) connected a vague remark at 1370a28 about phantasia being “weak perception” (αὐθέντης αἰσθήμας) with De An. 428b10ff. These leads have often been followed: see Rodier (on 428b27), Hicks (on 428b27), D.J. Allan, The Philosophy of Aristotle (Oxford paperback 1970) 52, and G.E. Mure, Aristotle (New York 1964) 116. In antiquity Themistius (De An. 92.1) thought that traces from perception would only be retained by the faculty of phantasia “for a certain time” (ἦ δὲ τῶν ἱμάδων). All these views simply rationalise the Aristotelian text which itself is entirely silent on the relative strength of phantasia vis-à-vis perception, just as it says nothing about images. Nussbaum (op. cit. note 8) regularly attacks the “decaying sense” interpretation of phantasia, yet still (250–252) finds this view in this final part of De An. III.3.

27. Cf. De Mem. 450a27–32 and De Insomn. 459a26–29, both cited by Rodier (on 428b11) in reconstructing 428b10–16 as an account of the formation of images. Both Alexander, de an. 68.4–10, and Themistius De An. 91.40–92.1, draw on the De Memoria passage; there are verbal echoes: cf. Alexander 68.6 (διὰ τοῦ ἀγγείου) with 450a29–30 (ἐπὶ τῶν ἱμάδων), and Themistius’ use at 91.40 of ἐν τοῖς ζεύγοις (cf. the seal rings identified at 450a32). See also note 32 below.

28. On “traces” cf. note 25 above. The term ἐγκατάλειψις (“residue”) is very common throughout the Greek commentator’s discussions of phantasia as the term that characterises mental images; see my remarks at Glotta 52 (1974) 210–211.


31. This reference to form is an indication that Themistius regarded phantasia as a repetition of aisthēsis which receives forms without matter; cf. De An. II.12, 424a17–24, where Aristotle’s comparison with physical imprinting probably encouraged commentators who modelled phantasia on the kind of imprinting to which the formation of images was compared at De Mem. 450a27–32 (cf. note 26 above).

32. De An. 92.7–12. Alexander (De An. 69.10) refers to the images of the faculty of phantasia as ἀπιερ αἰσθήματα, but unlike Themistius never considers the possibility of this faculty operating simultaneously with perception.

33. De An. 92.12–15. The continuation of this passage (92.16–23) contains Themistius’ distinction between the activity of phantasia towards its images, and the physical impressions made on inanimate bodies. It is sufficiently close to the discussion of the simultaneity of phantasia and aisthēsis for Stephanus to have mistakenly associated it with that issue; see sect. II above.

34. Themistius refers to τὸ ἐξάθεαν αἰσθήματον (92.9, 15–16) in contrast with the trace available to phantasia. Cf. Alexander, de an. 69.1–2, 69.9–10, for the same contrast. Themistius does not link phantasia with a specific bodily organ; that would have made the problem of simultaneous operation with aisthēsis even more complicated. Alexander does not link phantasia with the koînê aisthēsis located in the heart (de an. 97.11–14), while Neoplatonists locate phantasia in the brain: see Philononus, De An. 18.35–19.15, and Sophonias De An. 117.23–30.

35. See De Mem. 450a32–b 11 for an account of differing capacities for the retention of images. This is a particularly awkward passage for the commentators (see note 25) who use De Mem. 450a27–32 as evidence of the sort of image-formation supposedly endemic to phantasia. It would set restrictions on phantasia that Aristotle should have acknowledged in De An. III.3. In discussing phantasia Themistius (De An. 92.28–31) in fact suggests that people whose “mould” (ἐκφωνοῦ) is too solid (cf. De Mem. 450b4–5) have as a natural endowment something “like a store-house” (τομαῖον) of sense impressions.
36. See De Insomniis 459a23–459b1, and 460b28–461a8 for an account of how the images that emerge in dreams are a selection of impressions that are overlooked when awake.

37. The De Insomniis regularly identifies the sensory material of dreams as movements derived from aisthēmata (e.g., 460a29–30, 461a18–19, 461a26 etc.). Aisthēmata seem to be images that coexist with perception, and could therefore identify the case of simultaneous phantasía and aisthēsis without difficulty. But the ancient commentators took no interest in them. Aisthēmata are fully discussed by R. Sorabji, Aristotle On Memory (London 1972) 82–83.

38. 428b18–25 summarises De An. II.6; 428b25–27 connects this account of the corrigibility associated with different aisthētēs with the general description of phantasía as a movement derived from perception; and 427b27–30 defines true and false phantasía. The argument is continuous.

39. This has not stopped commentators reading images into this passage: see Hicks (on 428b26), who invokes the authority of Alexander, de an. 70.5–21. H.J. Blumenthal ("Neoplatonic Interpretations of Aristotle on Phantasía" p. 254) in discussing Stephanus' report of Themistius' paraphrase of 428b27 says that there Aristotle is "saying that in those cases where sensation of the special sensibles is still present the resulting image is not illusory." If this were correct, Themistius' thoughts about the simultaneity of phantasía and aisthēsis would then also be Aristotle's.

40. Specifically he repeats (De An. 93.16–17) the point (428b27–28) that where special objects of perception are concerned phantasía will be true when perception is present, and then rationalises (93.17–20), in the way indicated, the corrigibility associated with incidental and common aisthētēs. Stephanus (De An. 514.29–31) noted only the first of these passages; see sect. II above.

41. The term κίνησις is admittedly used elsewhere to describe processes that result in the formation of images; e.g. De Insomniis 460b29–30, 461a18–19, 461a26, 462a29–30; De Memoria 450a31. But these and similar usages cannot outweigh the overall context in which 428b10–16 is set. It is worth remarking that G.R.G. Mure Aristotle (reprinted New York 1964) 116 claimed that the physiological basis of phantasía was "the process of qualitative change set up in the perceptive act". At De An. 428b10–16 however, there is no reference to the allōsis that is involved in perception (cf. De An. 416b34–35), whereas when Aristotle does link the formation of after-images to perceptual allōsis (De Insomniis (459b1–7) he is talking about a special type of phantasía. Unlike his commentators Aristotle knew the difference between an account of mental imagery and his wider theory of phantasía. At 90.11–12 (apropos of 428a15–16) Themistius refers to the blind being precluded from φαντάζεσθαι χρώματα, and earlier (89.10–13, apropos 427b17–18) refers to our capacity to φαντάζεσθαι monstra. It is unlikely that the verb would change from meaning "form mental images" in those cases to any other sense at 90.11–12.

42. De An. 90.11–12 (ουδὲς γὰρ πλήθον δρῶν Σωκράτη λέγει "τούτων φαντάζομαι εἰλικρινῶς Σωκράτη"). At 90.3–4 (apropos of 428a5–16) Themistius refers to the blind being precluded from φαντάζεσθαι χρώματα, and earlier (89.10–13, apropos 427b17–18) refers to our capacity to φαντάζεσθαι monstra. It is unlikely that the verb would change from meaning "form mental images" in those cases to any other sense at 90.11–12.

43. "Aristotle on the Imagination" 108–110. Schofield also thinks that this example can be read as a case of imagination; see note 52 below.

44. De An. 91.14–17. Themistius admits that perception is involved here, but can only admit phantasía by introducing the process of image-formation.


46. Not surprisingly Themistius also reads 428a1–2 where Aristotle defines phantasía as that καθότινα λέγομεν φαντάσματα τι ἡμῖν γίγνεσθαι as involving images (οἷον τὸν τινά καὶ μορφήν τοῦ αἰσθήματος ἐν τῇ ψυχῇ). Schofield ("Aristotle on the Imagination" 115–123) discusses the meaning of φαντάσμα here and elsewhere, and argues effectively against identifying it with a mental image.

47. This account is not of course without some affinity to the discussion in the earlier part of the chapter. The association of false phantasía with distant objects of perception (428b29–30) recalls the case of the minuscule sun's false appearance (428b1), and that of an indistinctly perceived object of which we say "φαντάζει" (428a12–15). The crucial difference is that these earlier cases are contrasted with veridical perception, whereas now they could be contrasted with true phantasía, a meaningless notion in terms of the earlier account.

48. See De Insomniis 459a14–22. This passage associates τὸ φαντάσμα, and φάντασμα, with dreams, but it has to be read in the light of 458b29–33, where φαντάσμα is associated with misperception, and for that reason seems to be distinguishable from τὸ αἰσθήματος (the sensory experience itself). This, I believe, is the basis for the distinction between φαντάσματος
and αἰσθητικόν "in being" (τὸ εἶναι) at 459a15–16; the former picks out the class of deviant sensory experiences from among the class of all sensory experiences identified by αἰσθητικόν. The rest of the De Insomniis bears out this programme; cf. 466b3–20 for an analysis of "appearances" (φαντασία, φαντασία, φαντάσμα are the terms used), where these are the illusions suffered by the sick or the passionate. The fact that at 459a14–15 there is a reference to the De Anima suggests that Aristotle may be in effect revising earlier views of phantasia in this treatise.

49. This is how Sir David Ross read it (see Aristotle, 5th ed. London 1949, 142–143), but for different reasons. He regarded the whole notion of phantasia being simultaneous with perception as conflicting with Aristotle’s "usual" view that phantasia operated "only after the sensible object has gone." Recently J. Engmann, "Imagination and Truth in Aristotle," Journal of the History of Philosophy 14 (1976) 259–265 has tried to rationalise Aristotle’s use of truth and falsity in this passage. I would prefer to read De Insomniis 459a14–22 as revising this account; cf. preceding note.

50. At the end of De An. III.3, (429a4–8), Aristotle refers to animals, and human beings in abnormal states (sleep, sickness, passion), as acting on phantasemai because of their resemblance to perceptions. Earlier however the resemblance between phantasia and aisthēsis is made part of the definition of phantasia as a movement derived from perception (cf. 428b14), that in turn entails the account of true and false phantasia at 428b17–30. 420a4–8 now makes resemblance exclusively the explanation of misleading appearances, and points to the way the analysis of phantasia as a deviant form of sensory experience in the De Insomniis, where the effect of dreams is analysed along with an account of the sensory experiences of the sick and passionate (cf. 460b3–18). Interestingly Themistius paraphrases 429a4–8 by attributing human error to "the more powerful faculty" (τὴν κυριωτέραν δύναμιν) being obscured (cf. De An. 93.27–31, where κυριωτέρα δύναμις glosses νός at 429a6). This language is found in the De Insomniis: cf. 460b17–18 for a contrast between τὸ κύριον and the faculty by which φαντάσματα occur; cf. also 461b4–5, and 461b25, for κύριος used to identify a judgemental faculty. In general I believe that the De Insomniis gives an altogether clearer account of phantasia than the De Anima, as I hope to argue elsewhere.


52. Schofield emphasises the association between phantasia and what he calls "non-standard" sensory experiences, and argues (article cited note 8, 133 n. 25) that this can cover cases involving thinking, e.g. in visualising something we are doing something different from perceiving under standard conditions. Nussbaum (op. cit. note 8), on the other hand, emphasises what she generally calls the "interpretive" role of phantasia, and does not account for cases where phantasia identifies deviant sensory experiences; see my review of Aristotle’s De Motu Animalium forthcoming in Phoenix. Can such experiences also involve interpretation? Schofield suggests that they be analysed as cases of "abnormal imagination" (p. 123), but this depends on accepting his view that Aristotle’s account of free visualisation at De An. 427b16–24 provides criteria for normal imagination that can be extended to other areas of Aristotle’s treatment of phantasia. Yet visualisation is not, for example, Aristotle’s primary concern in identifying our perception of the sun’s magnitude as a false appearance (De An. 428b2), as Schofield admits (113–144). Also Schofield does not extend his discussion of phantasia as imagination into the area of practical reasoning, whereas Nussbaum’s conception of phantasia as "interpretive" focuses mainly on that area.

53. See notes 25 and 26 above.

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