Aristotle uses the faculty of phantasia to explain various different kinds of perceptual and quasi-perceptual phenomena, including indistinct perception, after-images, dreams, and memories, as well as to account, in part, for standard kinds of practical and theoretical thinking, desiring, and acting. The wide range of kinds of phenomena has challenged interpreters attempting to define it or even sketch what is central to the faculty. This paper seeks to analyze the unity of phantasia by examining whether in fact the term that signifies the power is being used as a related homonym.

I. Unity or Multiplicity: Framing the Issue

The faculty of phantasia, sometimes translated as “appearing” and more often as “imagination,” wears many masks. Across De Anima and Parva Naturalia (henceforth, An., PN, respectively), Aristotle invokes the faculty to account for several kinds of familiar perceptual activities such as dreaming, imagining, thinking, desiring, and acting, as well as less familiar phenomena such as hallucinations, after-images, and indistinct perceptions. As a consequence, it would not be surprising to find that neither Greek commentators nor modern scholars have succeeded in constructing a single, unifying interpretation of the faculty that accommodates all the phenomena with which the faculty is involved. For example, in his commentary on An. Π 3, 428a1-5, Alexander distinguishes a strict and a metaphorical sense of the faculty, differentiating the strict sense as “. . . a kind of change by which an image occurs in our soul” (ἐστι κινήσις τις . . . φάντασμα τι ἐμιν ἐν τῇ ψυχῇ γίνεσθαι), and the extended sense as indicating indifferently any of the cognitive faculties Aristotle there mentions, including perception, belief,
scientific knowledge, or intellect (*De Anima* 66, 20). In the nineteenth century, Trendelenburg reverses Alexander’s position, finding that *phantasia* is not one of the common, cognitive faculties, as he states, “If imagination is that through which images which are not precise with respect to the truth of a thing exist for us, then it cannot be one of those faculties we use to judge things.” Nor is any unanimity of opinion to be found with regard to the twentieth century or more recent scholarly interpretations where we find, for example, both the view that *phantasia* is a part-time faculty involved with indistinct appearances requiring skeptical attitudes as well as that *phantasia* is an ever-present, perceptual activity that allows us to interpret perceptual experience in general. The recent scholarly consensus seems to be that at best Aristotle’s account of *phantasia* possesses a loose, disjointed principle of unity or at worst lacks one altogether. The ambiguity that scholars discern in Aristotle’s account is thus reflected in the variety of interpretations they evince, making it difficult to find a clear path through the texts. Yet, it cannot be denied that a central, contributing cause to the non-uniformity in scholarship arises from the heterogeneity of phenomena to which Aristotle attributes *phantasia*. So, prior to assessing the success of the scholarship, it seems necessary to ascertain whether the faculty Aristotle calls one power should in fact be considered a single capacity; only then can we attempt to evaluate the success of the various scholarly interpretations.

We may endeavor to approach the question about the unity of *phantasia* by posing it in a dialectical manner, asking whether the term used for the faculty refers in the same sense across its various occurrences. Prior to assessing the degree to which *phantasia* is synonymous in the sense of having one univocal meaning, we need to draw certain distinctions between synonymy and various kinds of homonymy. A full investigation into a common term, or predicate, might involve successive stages in that a negative answer to the question about its synonymy would leave open a further issue as to whether it is merely accidentally homonymous or is homonymous in some

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3 The passage occurs at *An.* 3, 428a1-5 (discussed in section III), where Aristotle offers an explanation of *phantasia* both in terms of a *phantasma*-producing capacity and in terms of a judgmental faculty. Unless otherwise indicated, translations are mine.

4 “Si imaginatio est, qua imaginis nobis exsistunt, ad rei quidem veritatem non exactae: una eorum, quibus res iudicamus, facultas non potest” (Trendelenburg 1877, 375), cf. Rodier 1900, 414.

5 To mention but a few of the differing views, see Modrak 1987 and 2001; Nussbaum 1987; Schofield 1978.

6 For example, Ferrarin notes: “what is especially baffling is the vagueness and lack of precision in its description” (Ferrarin 2006, 91); Hamlyn, commenting on *An.* 3, 427b27, notes the lack of consistency (Hamlyn 2002, 131); compare Schofield 1992, 252.