Why Aristotle Needs Imagination

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In De anima 3.3, Aristotle argues at length that animals have a distinct, new capacity he calls ‘phantasia.’ But the point of this exercise – not to mention its urgency – is left unclear. The treatise hardly prepares us for it, having mentioned phantasia earlier only in passing; and the chapter’s serpentine argument nowhere announces its motives in a forthright way. Aristotle is clearly articulating something of key importance to his psychology. But the exact nature of his aims and results is hotly disputed.¹

To confuse matters still further, ‘phantasia’ is commonly translated as ‘imagination,’ which, in spite of its historical connections,² makes little


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sense of Aristotle’s arguments.³ And while the secondary literature standardly takes note of the discrepancy, it is difficult to remain uninfluenced. Appeal is often made to later discussions of the imagination — to the British Empiricists, for example, or Kant, or even Wittgenstein — in an effort to illuminate the text. But Aristotle stands at the beginning of this history, when imagination was not an established topic of discussion yet. To find out what he had in mind, then, we should start by asking why Aristotle needs “imagination,” or rather phantasia, in the first place.

A close reading of the opening of De anima 3.3 — a passage which has received scant attention in the literature⁴ — reveals that the chapter is centrally concerned with the problem of error, that is, the problem of explaining how the content of mental states could ever diverge from what is actually in the world.⁵ Aristotle poses this as a difficulty for his predecessors’ views on perception and thought, and taunts them for being unable to solve it. But the exact same complaint could be made of his own theory of sensation and conception, which he regards as the most basic forms of

³ Phantasia is not unrelated to imagination, insofar as Aristotle appeals to phantasia to explain visualizing and dreams. But he similarly appeals to phantasia to explain memory, expectation, thought, reasoning, desires, deliberation, passions, speech, and action (see n. 46 below); and there is no evidence that he thinks viewing mental images is involved in all of these. On the contrary, as he describes it, a good deal of phantasia’s activity must occur outside of consciousness: it is something that can eventuate in imagistic experience, but need not (see pp. 51-52 below). In this respect, we go less astray if we start with Plato’s use of the term to describe that fact that things literally “appear” to us in a certain way (φανέρως), that we take them to be thus and so, an activity that prima facie need not involve mental images at all. But we would still go astray. In De an. 3.3, Aristotle argues directly against Plato’s account, because even this is too strong. See p. 45 below.

⁴ Apart from the line-by-line commentaries, I have been unable to find any discussion of the opening passage in the secondary literature.

⁵ Error will occur both (i) when there are no objects corresponding to the content of a mental state and (ii) when these objects exist, but with different characteristics than are represented. Several clarifications are in order, though. (1) ‘Error,’ in the sense I am using it, extends more widely than propositional contents, so as to include inaccuracy in nonpropositional contents as well — an inaccurate portrait, for example, errs without being false in any strict propositional sense. Aristotle similarly vacillates in his use of ‘false,’ insisting most often on a strict propositional sense, but sometimes using it more broadly in the way I have just described for ‘error.’ (See below, n. 53.) (2) The sense of ‘error’ I am using here should be distinguished from a stronger sense that implies not only a divergence from reality, but also our being deceived or taken in by this divergence. The problem of error, however, only concerns how such divergences are possible in the first place, not the further and separate problem of why we are sometimes taken in by them. It is thus the weaker sense of ‘error,’ which does not imply acceptance or assertion, in which we will be interested.