Nous and Phantasia in Aristotle’s

*On the Soul*

Dr. Ioannis S. Christodoulou
Department of Classics and Philosophy
University of Cyprus
Cyprus
An Introduction to
ATINER's Conference Paper Series

ATINER started to publish this conference papers series in 2012. It includes only the papers submitted for publication after they were presented at one of the conferences organized by our Institute every year. The papers published in the series have not been refereed and are published as they were submitted by the author. The series serves two purposes. First, we want to disseminate the information as fast as possible. Second, by doing so, the authors can receive comments useful to revise their papers before they are considered for publication in one of ATINER's books, following our standard procedures of a blind review.

Dr. Gregory T. Papanikos
President
Athens Institute for Education and Research
This paper should be cited as follows:

Nous and Phantasia in Aristotle’s *On the Soul*

Dr. Ioannis S. Christodoulou  
Department of Classics and Philosophy  
University of Cyprus  
Cyprus

Abstract

Aristotle’s *On the Soul*, is one of the most intriguing philosophical treatises in the history of Western Philosophy. Despite Aristotle’s well known capacity in dealing with difficult philosophical problems, one cannot help but realise that Aristotle’s original ideas on the subject matter of imagination, cause more philosophical problems, than the ones Aristotle is expected to solve with his treatise.

In the present paper, I am trying to clarify what kind of meaning, if any, is expected to be found in imagination, according to Aristotle’s handling of the subject. In *De Anima*, there are several definitions of imagination, which, in certain occasions, do not seem to be fitting each other. When Aristotle first mentions “noein” in *De Anima*, he correlates noein with imagination. Aristotle might be using the word “phantasia” with the meaning of “image”. In that case, the “noein” could be supposed to exist as an image or not without some image. If this is so, then we might be obliged to accept that the image in question brings with it some kind of meaning. The question is: what kind of meaning is this? Is it a meaning accompanied by an image, or an image with a certain meaning?

I am giving an answer to this question by making use of Aristotle’s several mentions of imagination in *De Anima*. At the end, I am coming to the conclusion that imagination may have a wider sense than Aristotle scholars, along with Aristotle himself, are willing to admit.

Keywords:

Corresponding Author:
Noûs is one of the most demanding subjects of philosophical research. Trying to figure out what is happening when thinking goes on, is difficult enough, since everything that is to be found when looking for the content of our thought, is a matter of thought alone, and we are not really in a position to find out what the causes of our thought are. In any case, the subject of \( \nuo\v \) is of a paramount importance for philosophers of Ancient Greece already. Plato was the first to discuss several issues on the philosophy of mind, while Aristotle was preoccupied with the same issues, though much more systematically. In this paper, I am going to deal with Aristotle’s theory of \( \nuo\v \) in his \textit{Treatise on the Soul}.

Aristotle’s theorizing on the soul is of particular interest, because Aristotle is the one who, for the first time, gave philosophical content to the notions which we usually think of when referring to the mind procedures.\(^1\) Did Aristotle succeed in the definition of those notions? Did he focus adequately on the essence\(^2\) of the intellectual operations he referred to?

In the present paper, I take a close look at Aristotle’s endeavor to define imagination in \textit{De Anima}. In my opinion, the complicated nature of Aristotle’s account of \( \phi\alpha\tau\alpha\sigma\iota\alpha\iota \) is due not to his philosophical incompetence, but to the fact that it is a kind of futile enterprise to locate imagination philosophically as distinct mind function. Nevertheless, even if it is difficult to know what a mind function really is, it is easy to know the products of mind, that is the ideas, which make us talk about imagination. In my analysis, I take into account the connection between imagination and desire, and I come to the conclusion that both come into being, and are supposed to exist as intellectual functions, because of the unexplained appearance of some ideas, which are supposed to be ideas of both the desire and the imagination.

In his \textit{Treatise on the Soul},\(^3\) Aristotle tries hard to make the distinction between bodily functions and those which do not seem to be purely bodily,

\(^1\) According to Schofield (1997), who really made a seminal contribution to the study of \textit{De Anima}: ‘The great virtue of his account is its recognition of the range of psychological phenomena which deserve to be associated in this familial concept. His attempt to generalize from them about the logical peculiarities of the imagination is not carried through with a clear and steady view of the whole topic. But it remains seminal for anyone who seeks a better understanding. For Aristotle reminds us of the variety of the phenomena we need to consider, and compels us to find ways of connecting them; he puts in our hands, even if he himself does not exploit them very fully, many of the contrasts and comparisons which seem fundamental for the conceptual mapping of imagination; and his very inconsistencies suggest crucial problems in its comparative anatomy.’

\(^2\) Rorty (1997) explicitly accentuates the metaphysical character of Aristotle’s research: ‘The scope of \textit{De Anima} is much broader than that of either contemporary philosophy of mind or contemporary philosophical psychology. It is a metaphysical inquiry into the ontology of \( \psi\sigma\chi\v\v \) and of \( \nuo\v \);’

\(^3\) Concerning the text of \textit{On the Soul} itself, I always keep in mind Nussbaum’s warnings: ‘Like most other works of Aristotle, the \textit{De Anima} survives in a relatively large number of manuscripts; but none of these is earlier than the tenth century AD. (Fragments of the earlier tradition can in some cases be recovered from citations in the ancient commentators—see Section II below; but it must be remembered that their work itself survives only in manuscripts}
and, nevertheless, belong to the human substance. According to Aristotle, the human substance is continuous. The human soul is not to be considered as hypostasis itself, distinct from the human body. There are some conceivable intellectual data, attributable not to the human body straightforwardly, but to a certain mind function which is to be connected to the living human body, that is to the human soul. Let me explain, now, how Aristotle tries to clarify several mind functions.

In 403a8 of On the Soul, Aristotle first introduces his subject, uttering that, if a certain intellectual soul is to be differentiated from the body, νοεῖν is what may make it happen. Nevertheless, if νοεῖν is φαντασία, or if it couldn’t exist without φαντασία, the mind could not exist without the body. Obviously, then, Aristotle thinks of φαντασία as depended on the body. However, Aristotle does not give any definition neither for νοεῖν nor for φαντασία. This is what he is supposed to be doing later on. Indeed, when defining φαντασία, he makes clear that its characteristics would allow him to refer to νοεῖν as a certain operation of the mind.

Τίς, however, in the defining of νοῦς as φαντασία τινά, might very well mean that, for Aristotle, there are certain types of imagination, which, though, are not to be considered as distinct faculties of the mind. Alternatively, νοῦς does not exist without imagination (μὴ ἄνευ φαντασίας). This is not to be thought as without a certain imagination, since there might be several kinds of imagination. On the other side, Aristotle might mean that νοῦς contains some images, or that νοῦς itself is an image, or that it does not exist without an image. In that case, we might be obliged to accept that the image in question has or brings with it a certain intellectual content. Nevertheless, would it be a meaning accompanied by an image or an image accompanied by some meaning? Whatever the case may be, what is for sure is that Aristotle attributes to imagination a dominant role, whatever imagination is meant to be here.

Later on, in 427b15, Aristotle comes back, and states that imagination differs from sensation as well as from νοεῖν. However, imagination cannot

---

3 Goldberg (2004) summarizes successfully the character of Aristotle’s theorizing: ‘To see how liberally Aristotle uses mentalistic terms, consider first what he means by ‘soul’. Aristotle seems to treat soul as function.’

4 ‘μάλιστα δ’ έοικεν ιδιω το νοεῖν ει δ’ εστι και τοτε φαντασία τις ή μη άνευ φαντασίας, ουκ ένδέχετοι ην ουδε τοτε άνευ σώματος είναι.’

5 According to Caston (2005): ‘Aristotle is trying to make as general a claim as he can about the soul’s relation to the body and about the consequences this has for the proper form of definition for psychological states, as involving both matter and form. He countenances only one possible exception, the understanding; and even here he thinks there may be a connection with the body. If this is right, then Aristotle seems to be committed to underlying physiological changes in perception and quite possibly for every type of mental state in general. The passage appears to voice support, directly and explicitly, for both a Broad Church position and Chalcedonian Orthodoxy.’

6 ‘φαντασία γάρ έτερον και αισθήσεως και διανοίας, αύτη τε ου γίνεται άνευ αισθήσεως και άνευ ταύτης ουκ έστιν ύπόληψις, δι’ ουκ έστιν ή αυτή [νόησις] και ύπόληψις, φανερον.’
exist without sensation, and without imagination there is no way to have as a result ὑπόληψις, which is the outcome of νοεῖν. Nevertheless, even if we take as granted, that imagination differs from sensation and mind, we cannot identify it, since we do not know what Aristotle had in mind when referring to sensation and mind. As far as the relation of imagination and sensation is concerned, it is rational to be wondering likewise: is imagination depended on sensation? What if imagination is not an operation, but a consequence of the sensational consciousness?

On the other hand, as far as the relation of imagination with the intellect is concerned, either imagination is a particular operation, which cooperates with the intellect, in order to produce ὑπόληψις, or it is a part of the intellect. However, Aristotle makes clear that imagination is not the intellect. What’s the probability, then, of imagination’s being a part of νοεῖν, without being νοεῖν? Actually, in 427b30, Aristotle defines that a part of νοεῖν is imagination while the other one is ὑπόληψις.

Anyway, in 427b, Aristotle makes clear what he thinks of imagination. Images in φαντασία, he says, are of the same rank with those in a painting. Obviously, Aristotle means that we consciously regard them as feign images and nothing more. This may be true for this particular kind of imagination alone.

Next, in 428a, Aristotle tries to identify what imagination is. He says that imagination is responsible for the production of images. Nevertheless, imagination is not a certain ability or ἔξις. Nor has it a critical power. It can neither be true or false. Nevertheless, later on Aristotle says that most of the ‘imaginings’ are false. However, what does ‘false’ mean here? Does it mean that imaginations are not corresponding to sensations? As a matter of fact, the ones and the others differ by definition. By sensation we dot mean imagination. Nevertheless, Aristotle might have thought that imagination functions

---

1 See also 428a: ‘ἴτα ἑαν ἀθήσης µὲν ἄει πάροστι, φαντασία δ’ οὖ.’
2 Mesaros’ (2010) description, I think, is fair enough:” Imagination is a “border” or a territory of encounter for sensation and intellect, an uncertain area on which thinking depends but it can not rigorously be founded.’
3 See also 427b29: ‘περὶ δὲ τοῦ νοεῖν, ἐπεὶ ἐπερον τοῦ αἰσθάνεσθαι, τοῦτον δὲ τὸ µὲν φαντασία δοκεῖ εἴναι τὸ δὲ ὑπόληψις, περὶ φαντασίας διωρίσαντας οὐδὲ περὶ θατέρου λεκτέων.’
4 That’s why, I think, V. Caston (2002) summarizes the Aristotelian theory of perception as follows: ‘Our perceptions have a phenomenal character, that has to do with the qualities they represent, but is not exhausted by representational content.’
5 ‘εἰ δὲ ἐστιν ἡ φαντασία καθ’ ἡν λέγομεν φαντασµα τι ἢµιν γίγνεσθαι καὶ µὴ εἰ τι κατὰ μεταφορὰν λέγοµεν, ἢ ἃρα µία τις ἐστὶ τούτων δόναις ἢ ἔξις καθ’ ἂς κρίνοµεν καὶ ἠληθεύουµεν ἢ φαντασίας ἢ µελέτηται, …’
6 Frede (1997) gives us a good idea of the several dimensions of imagination: ‘We are also unsure what capacity, what process, and what product the word denotes in each case. … It would then be (i) the capacity to experience an appearance, (ii) the on-going appearance itself, and (iii) what appears.’
7 ‘εἰ δὲ τῇ ἐνεργείᾳ τὸ αὐτὸ, πάσιν ἐν ἐνδέχεσθαι τοῖς θηρίοι φαντασίαν ύπάρχειν: δοκεῖ δ’ οὖ, οἷον µόρµηκα ἢ µελέτητα, σκόληκα δ’ οὖ. εἴτα αἱ µὲν ἀληθείς ἂν, αἱ δὲ φαντασίαι γίνονται αἰ πλέιους φαντασίας.’
independently from sensation. This would be a contradiction though, since αὐτή τε ὑπὲρ γίγνεται ἄνευ αἰσθήσεως. (427b15)

Lastly, Aristotle wonders whether imagination is ὁδόξα.¹ Imagination is not ὁδόξα. Ὁδόξα is ὁδόξα of the objects of sensation. However, if imagination is due to sensation, could there be a ὁδόξα of imagination as well? Rather not, because ὁδόξα is something which imagination could never be, and because, as Aristotle states, ὁδόξαίειν δ’ οὐκ ἐφ’ ἡμῖν, while imagining anything is supposed to be a matter of volitional action. Paradoxically though, Aristotle says that τὸ οὖν φαίνεσθαι ἐσται τὸ ὁδόξαίειν ὅπερ αἰσθάνεται, μή κατὰ συμβεβηκός.²

According to Aristotle, imagination is an action of the will.³ However, if imagination is depended on sensation, then it could not be a result of the will, since what one perceives via senses is not a result of the will. In addition, if imagination is the same with sensation, why is it false most of the times? So, the question remains. What kind of imagination is true or false? Is imagination equally true and false? What is the criterion of defining imagination as true or false?⁴ Does it depend on what the subject suffers because of it? In any case, what Aristotle says earlier, seems to be inconsistent: αὐτῆς δὲ φαντασίας γίνονται αἱ πλείους ψυχεῖς.

In another context, imaginations produce acts in animals par excellence, but in humans as well, διὰ τὸ ἐπικαλύπτεσθαι τὸν νοῦν ἐνιοτε πάθη ἢ νόσον ἢ ὑπόστα ἢ ὑπόπτον...⁵ Aristotle seems to be implying here that the images of imagination do not have a cognitive content, at least when they are the result of situations which, by definition, produce errors: passions, illnesses, sleep. In the case of animals, however, imagination has a cognitive role, since animals have no other cognitive faculty. Therefore, it is easy to explain why Aristotle states: διὰ τὸ ἐμέναιν καὶ ὁμοίας εἶναι ταῖς αἰσθήσεσι. But, if this is so, what about humans? Is there a contradiction here? Imaginations which resemble to sensations are the same with those produced in passions, illnesses and sleep, which, by definition, are not attributable to sensations⁶ According to Aristotle,

---

¹ ‘λείπεται ἃρα ἰδέαν εἰ ὁδόξα... οὐδὲ ὁδόξα μετ’ αἰσθήσεως, οὐδὲ δ’ αἰσθήσεως, οὐδὲ συμπλοκή ὁδόξης καὶ αἰσθήσεως, φαντασία ἂν εἴη...’
² See 428b: ‘τὸ οὖν φανεράτως ἐσται τὸ ὁδόξαίειν ὅπερ αἰσθάνεται, μή κατὰ συμβεβηκός, φαίνεται δὲ γε καὶ ψευδῆ, περὶ ὅν ἄμα ὑπόληψην ἀληθῆ ἔχει, οἷον φαίνεται μὲν ὁ ἡλίους ποδιάς, πιστεύεται δ’ εἶναι μείζων τῆς οἰκουμένης... οἷτ’ ἄρα ἐν τῷ τοῦτον ἐστὶν οὔτ’ ἐκ τούτων ἡ φαντασία.’
³ See 427b15: ‘τοῦτο μὲν γὰρ τὸ πάθος ἐφ’ ἡμῖν ἐστιν, ὅταν βουλώμεθα (πρὸ ὀμμάτων γὰρ ἐστι τι ψυχήσασθαι, διὸ ὅτι εἶν τοὺς μυημονικοὺς τιθέμενοι καὶ εἰδολοποιοῦντες),... κατὰ δὲ τὴν φαντασίαν ὡσοστοῦ ἔχομεν ὅσπερ ἀν εἰ θεώμενοι ἐν γραφῇ τὰ δεινὰ ἢ θαρραλέα.’
⁴ According to Engmann (1976): ‘What underlies the apparent inconsistencies in Aristotle’s account of imagination is not only a dual conception of imagination, but also a dual conception of truth.’
⁵ See 429a5: ‘καὶ διὰ τὸ ἐμέναιν καὶ ὁμοίας εἶναι ταῖς αἰσθήσεσι, πολλὰ κατ’ αὐτὰς πράττει τὰ ζυγα, τὰ μὲν διὰ τὸ μὴ ἔχειν νοῦν, οἷον τὰ θηρία, τὰ δὲ διὰ τὸ ἐπικαλύπτεσθαι τοὺν νοῦν ἐνιοτε πάθη ἢ νόσον ἢ ὑπόστα, οἷον οἱ ἀνθρώποι, περὶ μὲν οὖν φαντασίας, τί ἐστι καὶ διὰ τί ἐστιν, εἰρήθησθο ἐπί τοσοῦτον.’
⁶ The same way as Frede (1997), I treat phantasias as unified concept in Aristotle. Frede refers to phantasias as follows: ‘They are sensory images or imprints that can exist independently from their original source. Their history may be quite different, depending on whether they are
Aristotle, humans act κατὰ τὰς φαντασίας only in passions, illnesses and sleep. In every other case, human beings act according to the intellect, which, nevertheless, contains imaginations.

Of course, once more, it is evident that the productivity of imagination is not a matter of the will. In addition, while in passions or illnesses, the images of imagination are not painless at all: δόσπερ ἄν εἰ θεώμενοι ἐν γραφῇ τὰ δεινά. There is another question as well. Why is it that the intellect does not function in illnesses and passions? Does imagination have an intellectual content, which leads to action? This is not consistent with Aristotle’s theory. Consequently, imaginations are not produced reflectively alone, because of the act of the senses. We do not imagine only because we have senses. If this is so, then where φαντασίαι come from? Aristotle does not really tell anything about such an origin. In addition, φαντασίαι may be produced independently from the senses in the case of animals as well. Finally, why is it that φαντασίαι are deprived of cognitive value in passions, illnesses and sleep? And what if they have such a value? What if the cognitive content of φαντασίαι is the generator of passions?

I am coming, now, in the Aristotelian analysis of the connection between φαντασία and νοῦς. In 431a15 Aristotle says that in the ‘intellectual soul’ the images look like senses. Those φαντάσματα, according to Aristotle, are neutral, till the intellect pronounces its positive or negative view. In that instance, the humans act in order to pursue or avoid whatever. Nevertheless, the question again is: where those φαντάσματα come from? Certainly, they do not arise the way αἰσθήματα do. Αἰσθήματα are caused thanks to the objects which move the senses. Do φαντάσματα have objects? If φαντάσματα are similar to αἰσθήματα, then they have the same objects. Consequently, φαντασίαι are not false. Nevertheless, this does not seem to be true in the case of passions, illnesses and sleep.

due to immediate awareness or have undergone a long-term storage, as may be their function and the occasion of their occurrence in dreams, hallucinations, memory, thoughts, or decisions. Most of all, their character and value may vary: they may be clear or confused, simple or complex, true or false.'

1 Caston (1998) considers the connection in question as a matter of intentionality: ‘Aristotle not only formulates the problem of intentionality explicitly, he makes a solution to it a requirement for any adequate theory of mind. …. In fact, it is precisely because Aristotle regards this theory as inadequate that he goes on to argue for a distinct new ability he calls ‘phantasia’. … The theory of content he develops on this basis (unlike Brentano’s) is profoundly naturalistic: it is a representational theory, formulated in terms of the causal powers and physical magnitudes of the body.’

2 ‘τῇ δὲ διανοητικῇ ψυχῇ τὰ φαντάσματα ὁδὸν αἰσθήματα ὑπάρχει, ὅταν δὲ ἂγαθὸν ἢ κακὸν φήσῃ ἢ ἀποφήσῃ, φεύγει ἢ δικαίωσθαι διὸ οὐδέποτε νοεῖ ἄνευ φαντάσματος ἢ ψυχῆς.’ Beginning from the end, is φάντασμα a reason for the soul to think? It seems that the soul does not think without a φάντασμα in it.

3 Although White (1985) accentuates Aristotle’s parallelism between sensation and imagination, he fails to see the importance of this parallelism for the cognitive value of phantasmata: ‘The analysis of sensation, the characteristic power of animals, could, it seems, be adequately carried out with little reference to phantasia, even though Aristotle is elsewhere led to stress the closeness, and even, in some respect, the identity of these two powers;...’ See also Lowe (1983).
According to 431b, νοῦς is moved by φαντάσματα, just like it is being moved by sensible objects. The movement of the intellect is knowledge, which is being based in the sense of sensible objects and the common sense. The intellect thinks and decides the same way when moved by the senses and φαντάσματα or νοήματα as well. Is there a chance, then, that φαντάσματα have a certain intellectual content? If this is the case, then the so called νοῦς probably does nothing but give its consent to an already given meaning. Νοῦς may just make a pronouncement of the meaning which already exists. This is probably the reason that Aristotle uses the verbs φήσῃ, ἀποφήσῃ and εἴη, when referring to νοῦς.

In addition, later on, Aristotle defines νοῦς as εἴδος εἰδών. But, if this is so, then νοῦς may contain imagination as well. This may be confirmed by Aristotle’s stating that: τὰ νοητὰ ἐν τοῖς εἰδόσι τοῖς αἰσθητοῖς. So, the theoretical knowledge as well, is due to φαντάσματα. This being the case, why φαντασία are false? Besides, φαντάσματα do not seem to be material. Nevertheless, if φαντάσματα are like αἰσθήματα, what is the matter of αἰσθήματα? In any case, Aristotle makes clear that imagination has nothing to do with the pronouncements of the intellect. But, if true and false is a matter of combination of meaning, why is that the φαντασία are false? Which are the first meanings?

The analysis regarding imagination in Aristotle’s De Anima, is concluded with the explanation of the notion of desire (ὄρεσκον). In 432a30 Aristotle declares that the φανταστικόν, which could be explained as the operation of imagination, is different in comparison to other functions of the mind. As far as the ὀρεκτικόν is concerned, it is to be found both in the thinking and the non-thinking part of the soul. What exactly is, then, the relation between

1 ‘τὰ μὲν οὖν εἴδη τὸ νοητικὸν ἐν τοῖς φαντάσμασι νοεῖ, καὶ ώς ἐν ἑκείνοις ὀρίσται αὐτῷ τὸ διωκτὸν καὶ φευκτὸν, καὶ ἐκτὸς τῆς αἰσθήσεως, ὅταν ἐπὶ τῶν φαντασμάτων ἦ, κινεῖτα... ὅτε δὲ τοῖς ἐν τῇ ψυχῇ φαντασμάσαι νομίζοιν, ὀσπέρ ὀρὸν, λογίζεται καὶ βούλευται τὰ μέλλοντα πρὸς τὰ παρόντα· καὶ ὅταν εἰσῆ ὡς ἐκεῖ τὸ ἡδυ ιυπηρην, ἐνταῦθα φεύγει ἄ διωκτο καὶ ὁμοί ἐν πράξει.’

2 According to Caston (2006):’Aristotle explicitly treats phantasms as representations that underwrite the content of mental states generally. ... But they are not in general something “towards which” (ad quem) mental states are directed – in general they are not themselves the objects of mental states.’

3 See 431b 30: ἦστε ἢ ψυχῇ ὀσπέρ ἢ χείρ ἐστιν· καὶ γὰρ ἢ χείρ ὁργάνων ἐστιν ὁργάνων, καὶ ὁ νοῦς εἴδος εἰδών καὶ ἡ αἰσθήσεις εἴδος αἰσθητῶν. ἐπει δὲ οὐδὲ πράγμα οὐθεν ἔσται παρά τα μεγέθη, ὡς δοκεῖ, τὰ αἰσθητὰ κεχορισμένον, ἐν τοῖς εἰσδέ τοι αἰσθητοῖς τὰ νοητὰ ἐστί, τὰ τε ἐν ἀφαίρεσι λεγόμενα καὶ ὅσα τῶν αἰσθητῶν ἔξεσι καὶ πάθη, καὶ διὰ τοῦτο οὐδὲ μὴ αἰσθητομένους μηθεν οὐθέν ἐν μάθοι οὐδὲ ἐξουσίαν ὅταν τὸ θεωρῆ γνάκη ἁμα φανταστική καὶ θεωρητική· τὰ γὰρ φαντασμάτα ὀσπέρ αἰσθητότα ἐστί, πλὴν ἄνευ ὑλῆς. ἦστι δ’ ἡ φαντασία ἐπερον φάσεως καὶ ἀποφάσεως· συμπλοκή γὰρ νομιμάτων ἐστὶ τὸ ἄληθὲς ἢ φαντάς. τὰ δὲ πρώτα νομίματα τι διοίσει τοῦ μὴ φαντασμάτα εἶναι; ἢ οὐδὲ τάξιν αἰσθητόταμα, ἀλλ’ οὐκ άνευ φαντασμάτων.’

4 ’Επὶ δ’ τὸ φανταστικόν, ὃ τὸ μὲν εἶναι πάντων ἐπερον, τίνι δὲ τοῦτο τῶν ἐπερον ἔχει πολλὰν ἀπαίρον, εἰ τὶς θησιν κεχορισμένα μόρια τῆς ψυχῆς· πρὸς δὲ τοῦτος τὸ ὀρεκτικόν, ὃ καὶ λόγοι καὶ δυνάμει ἐπερον ἄν δῶξειν εἶναι πάντων. καὶ ἄτοπον δὴ τὸ τοῦτο διαστᾶν· ἐν τῇ τῷ λογιστικῷ γάρ ἢ βουλήσεις γίνεται, καὶ ἐν τῷ ἀλόγῳ ἢ ἐπιθυμία καὶ ὁ θυμός· εἰ δὲ τρία ἢ ψυχή, ἐν ἀκάτῳ ἐσται ὅρεξις.’
imagination and desire? Does the desire provide with content the imagination or the opposite? Aristotle says that the imagination provides with content the desire.

Nevertheless, Aristotle, in 433a, in order to explain the movement of the living being, uses νοῦς with the meaning of φαντασία. The impression that is being given, is that φαντασία is νόησις as well. From what point of view? In order to understand this, I think, we have to go back, to the imagination which is to be found in sleep, passions and illnesses. In any case, as far as the principle of movement is concerned, Aristotle thinks that this principle is to be found in ὀρεκτόν, which moves via the intellect. But, if this is so, then it is not ὀρεκτόν, than means the object of the desire, that moves, but its image!

According to Aristotle, though, imagination is not supposed to have the ability to move a living creature, if it is not for the desire to be present. What is desire then? Is it contained in the imagination? Is it a kind of meaning? What characterizes imagination and desire, is that both are ‘right and not right’, in contrast with νοῦς, which is always right. Of course, Aristotle does not make clear why desire and imagination are right and not right.

In any case, the power that moves a living being is the desire, and, as I told earlier, the object of the desire prevails. Nevertheless, this procedure is accomplished through the intellect or the imagination. Aristotle does not clarify why he uses those two terms interchangeably. In 433b31, imagination is described as having two aspects. On the one side it is thoughtful, and on the other it is sensible. The imagination which is connected with the senses, as I told earlier, there exists in other animals as well, while the thoughtful one is to be found only in human beings.

---

1 In 433a11 Aristotle says: ‘Φαίνεται δέ γε δύο ταῦτα κινοῦντα, ἡ δὲ ὄργανον, ἢ νοῦς, εἰ τις τὴν φαντασίαν τύθη ὡς νόησιν τίνα; πολλοὶ γὰρ παρὰ τὴν ἐπιστήμην ἀκολουθοῦσι ταῖς φαντασίαις, καὶ ἐν τοῖς ἄλλοις ζοῖς οὐ νόησις οὐδὲ λογισμὸς ἐστὶν, ἀλλὰ φαντασία. ἥμων ἀρα ταῦτα κινητικά κατὰ τόπον, νοῦς καὶ ὄργανον...’

2 See 433a21: τὸ ὀρεκτόν γὰρ κινεῖ, καὶ δίᾳ τούτῳ ἢ διάνοια κινεῖ, ὅτι ἄρχη αὕτης ἐστὶ τὸ ὀρεκτόν.’

3 See 433a23: ‘καὶ ὡς φαντασίαν δὲ ὄργανος, οὐ κινεῖ ἄνευ ὀρέξεως. ἐν δὲ τῷ τούτῳ, τῷ ὀρεκτικῷ. εἰ γὰρ δύο, νοῦς καὶ ὄργανος, ἐκδοτός, κατὰ κοινὸν ἐὰν ἐκδοτὸς εἶναι τὸν ὀρέξας νοῦς, ὃς τοῦτον λογισμὸν κινήσει, καὶ κατὰ βουλὴν κινεῖται, ἡ δὲ ὄργανος κινεῖ καὶ παρὰ τὸν λογισμὸν ἢ γάρ ἐπιθυμία ὄργανος τίς ἐστίν.’

4 ‘νοῦς μὲν οὖν πᾶς ὄργανος ἐστίν· ὄργανος δὲ καὶ φαντασία καὶ ὄρθος καὶ οὐκ ὀρθὴ. διὸ ἀπὸ κινεῖ μὲν τὸ ὀρεκτόν, ἀλλὰ τὸῦτ’ ἐστίν ἢ τὸ ἀγαθὸν ἢ τὸ φαντάζομαι ἢ τὸν ἄγαθον. οὐ πᾶν δὲ, ἀλλὰ τὸ πρακτόν ἀγαθόν. πρακτόν δὲ ἐστὶ τὸ ἐνδυχόμενον καὶ ἄλλα ἐξεῖν.’

5 See 433b: ὃτι μὲν οὖν ηθικὴ δύναμις κινεῖ τῆς ψυχῆς, ἡ καλούμενη ὄργανος, φανερῶν. ... εἰδει μὲν ἐν ἄν εἴη τὸ κινοῦν, τὸ ὀρεκτικόν, ὃ ὀρεκτικόν-πρότον δὲ πάντων τὸ ὀρεκτόν· τότε γὰρ κινεῖ οὐ κινοῦμεν, τῷ νοηθηθείναι ἢ φαντασθῆναι-ἀριθμῷ δὲ πλείω τὰ κινοῦντα.’

6 ὃς μὲν οὖν, ἄσπερ ἐρρίωθη, ἢ ὀρεκτικόν τὸ ζύον, ταύτη ἄστι οἰκονομίκῳ · ὀρεκτικόν δὲ οὐκ ἄνευ φαντασίας· φαντασία δὲ πάσα ἢ λογιστική ἢ οἰκονομική· τάτης μὲν οὖν καὶ τὰ ἄλλα ζῶα μετέχει.’

7 See 434a6: ‘ἡ μὲν οὖν αἰσθητική φαντασία, ἄσπερ ἐρρίωθη, καὶ ἐν τοῖς ἄλλοις ζοῖς ὑπάρχει, ἢ δὲ βουλευτικὴ ἐν τοῖς λογιστικοῖς (πότερον γὰρ πράξει τόδε ἢ τόδε, λογισμοῦ ήδη ἐστὶν ἐργὸν· καὶ ἀνάγκη ἐν ἡμεῖς· τὸ μεῖζον γὰρ διώκει ὡστε δίνει ἐκ τῆς πλειονοῦ φαντασμάτων ποιεῖν).’
So, in order to understand how Aristotle thinks of imagination, we have to refer to the desire. Aristotle thinks of the desire as belonging to several mental functions. So, desire is connected to imagination. In a way, desire is expressed through imagination, since the object of the desire, which is supposed to prevail, is mediated by the intellect or the imagination.

Our conclusion, then, is that Aristotle, while trying to attribute ideas to intellectual functions, he always return to the result of those functions, that means the idea. As far as the ideas of the imagination are concerned, they resemble to those of the senses, but they are not the senses themselves, neither their images while working. The images of imagination seem to arise suddenly, without being able to know how they do so or where they come from. What Aristotle declares about the procedure of desire, make us wonder as follows. What exactly is the role of the desire in the production of the idea of ὀρέκτον? Aristotle says that the ὀρέκτον comes first. If the image, indeed, of the ὀρέκτον comes first, then it brings with it a sort of meaning, and makes this meaning exist as a certain desire. From this point of view, the desire does not produce the image in question. When we say “I want to do this” or “I want this”, the thing in question is not the “object” of an operation of the human mind. The desire of whatever form is contained in its objects. The images of the objects are prevailing. Those images, I repeat, come about without knowing their source or be in a position to understand why they last so much as they last.

So, Aristotle, instead of locating φαντασία as a mental function whatever, he presents it as the reality of intellectual images, which are the content of several mental states. What is important is that the mental states in question are only a way to refer to the ideas which, in the final analysis, matter the most. Aristotle’s analysis of the mental functions mentioned, far from being acute, is indicative of the fact that mental content prevails whatever the procedures of its production may be, or whatever the names one invents, in order to describe those procedures.

Bibliography