

Aristotle's *Phantasia* and its Role within *Phronesis*: A Question

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Let me begin by thanking Jana Noel for this thoughtful, well-written paper that continues a discussion begun by others. I agree with her claim that these writers have helped to bring to our attention the role of the imagination in learning and teaching, and I am sympathetic to her apparent conviction that we need to help students to develop their imaginations. Indeed, I have argued¹ that even Harvey Siegel has joined the ranks of the enlightened in maintaining, with Blythe McVicker Clinchy,² Dolores Gallo³ and others that imagination has a role to play in critical thinking. I think we need to ponder with great care how the imagination is to be cultivated and to reach a clearer understanding than we now have about the role of the imagination in various modes of thought. Perhaps the latter intention has inspired Jana Noel to explore the relation between *phantasia* and *phronesis*.

When I first read Prof. Noel's paper, I liked it very much and was relieved that the Society had seen fit to assign me such a good piece of writing. As I pondered it, wondering what I could possibly offer by way of discussion, I found my mind wending its way back to class I took on the *Nichomachean Ethics* (*EN*) taught by Joseph J. Schwab at the University of Chicago — a rigorous and exacting instructor. On one occasion that stands out in my mind, Schwab took a student mightily to task for interpolating passages from *De Anima* into a discussion of the soul that was supposed to be based upon *EN*. It was not at all clear to me at the time what was so objectionable about this practice and indeed, what injury had been done to the analysis by following it. What I remember was Schwab's fury.

I began, then, to wonder whether any harm had been rendered by working to illuminate the concept of *phronesis* using the concept of *phantasia*—*phronesis* being a concept that is developed in *EN* and as far as I know, not found in *DA*, which is said to have been written later than much of *EN*.⁴ Might it be that the juxtaposition of these two concepts —tempting as it is to make the juxtaposition — raises difficulties not at first apparent?

In order to address the question, I returned to the discussion of practical wisdom—*phronesis*—in the *EN*. Aristotle writes:

The most characteristic function of a man of practical wisdom is to deliberate well: no one deliberates about things that cannot be other than they are, nor about things that cannot be directed to some end, an end that is a good attainable by action. In an unqualified sense, that man is good at deliberating who, by reasoning, can aim at and hit the best thing attainable to man by action (1141b9-14).⁵

Three characteristics of *phronesis* are suggested by this passage. First, when Aristotle says that "the most characteristic function of a man of practical wisdom is to deliberate well," he seems to mean that a person with practical wisdom is able to arrive at a suitable conclusion through reasoning, or deliberation. Second, the "conclusion" is about what is to be done—an end "that is attainable by action," as he says. Third, that end—that thing to be done—is something good. He summarizes

by saying, “that man is good at deliberating who, by reasoning, can aim at and hit the best thing attainable by action, “i.e., by reasoning, he can identify what is the best thing to do in a situation—the morally correct thing—and how to reach that end.

Now, a bit later, Aristotle stresses that practical wisdom is not scientific knowledge:

As we stated, [practical wisdom] is concerned with ultimate particulars, since the actions to be performed are ultimate particulars. This means that it is at the opposite pole from intelligence. For intelligence grasps limiting terms and definitions that cannot be attained by reasoning, while practical wisdom has as its object the ultimate particular fact, of which there is perception but no scientific knowledge (1142a23-29).

Practical wisdom is not scientific knowledge. The latter is acquired by means of the intelligence, which “grasps limiting terms and definitions that cannot be attained by reasoning.” So, for example, one can learn the theory of relativity and use it to predict outcomes because the intelligence can grasp the definitions that the theory utilizes. These definitions are not reached through as process of reasoning—indeed, they cannot be grasped by such a means. Practical wisdom, on the other hand, which aims at determining the “ultimate particular”—the morally correct end and the means of reaching it in a given situation—is achieved through good deliberation—correct reasoning—but not by grasping things beyond reason (like definitions).

In the passage above, Aristotle tells us that there is “perception” of the end that is sought by deliberation but no scientific knowledge of it. Now a comment such as this might incline one to explore what Aristotle means by perception. Does he mean that the goal toward which practical wisdom aims—the “ultimate particular,” “the right/good action in a given situation”—is somehow perceived? Here one might suspect that Aristotle is opening the way for imagination: perhaps it is the imagination which somehow perceives the right action. Indeed, that is the hypothesis that Nussbaum, Pendlebury and Noel offer us. Nussbaum writes:

Aristotle tells us in no uncertain terms that people of practical wisdom, both in public and in private life, will cultivate emotion and imagination in themselves and in others, and will be very careful not to rely too heavily on a technical or purely intellectual theory that might stifle or impede these responses. They will promote an education that cultivates fancy and feeling through works of literature and history, teaching appropriate occasions for and degrees of response.⁶

Nussbaum’s defense of the claim that people of practical wisdom “will cultivate imagination” is complex, and this is not the occasion for careful scrutiny of it. I can say, however, that I am skeptical that the conclusion is well justified by Aristotle’s arguments in the EN, where *phantasia*, the word for imagination that is found in *De Anima*, is mentioned infrequently, if at all. Indeed, when Nussbaum offers a definition of *phantasia*, she turns not to EN but to *De Anima* and *De Motu*.⁷ Noel, too, draws the definition of *phantasia* from *De Anima*, 428a1 and following. Let’s look at the passage:⁸

It is clear, then, that imagination cannot be either opinion in conjunction with sensation, or opinion based upon sensation, or a blend of opinion based on sensation....because the opinion relates to nothing else but the object of the sensation: I mean that imagination is the blend of perception of white with the opinion that it is white—not surely of the perception of white with the opinion that it is good. (428a1-9)

Imagination—*phantasia*—seems to involve sense perception —seeing something which is white and designating it as white. As Noel points out, *phantasia*, as it is defined in the above passage, seems to involve the manipulation of mental pictures — fort example, seeing the thing experienced through perception as white. Aristotle says:

Imagination always implies perception: it is an affectation which lies in our power whenever we choose it (for it is always possible to call up mental pictures, as those do who employ images in arranging their ideas under a mnemonic system (427b16-22).

Now, given this definition of *phantasia*, does it seem plausible to argue that it has a role to play in the exercise of practical wisdom? I am not certain of the answer, but here are some reasons why I am skeptical of this suggestion, given Aristotle's discussion of practical wisdom in *EN*.

First, let us look again at *EN* 1142a, where the discussion of perception continues:

For the intelligence grasps limiting terms and definitions that cannot be attained by reasoning, while practical wisdom has as its object the ultimate particular fact, of which there is perception but no scientific knowledge. This perception is not the kind with which (each of our five senses apprehends) its proper object, but the kind with which we perceive that in mathematics the triangle is the ultimate figure (1142a26-29).

Aristotle goes on to add a caveat to his example. Nevertheless, when he says that the perception involved in the exercise of practical wisdom "is not the kind with which each of our five senses apprehends its proper object," he seems to mean that it is not sense perception. Rather, the perception he has in mind is more akin to the perception of a polygon as made up of a series of triangles (Otswald's interpretation), or similarly, the recognition that "Socrates is mortal" is implied by the premises: All men are mortal; Socrates is a man. I may be mistaken in offering the latter as an example of perception (of the non-sense sort), but I suggest it because it is so compatible with Aristotle's foremost claim about practical wisdom: "The most characteristic function of a man of practical wisdom is that he deliberates well" (1141b9-10). The perceiving of implication seems a necessary component of good deliberation.

The fact that *phantasia*, at least as portrayed in *De Anima*, is grounded in sense perception, whereas the perception involved practical wisdom is said by Aristotle to be of a non-sensory sort suggests that the concept of practical wisdom, as described by Aristotle in *EN*, may be part of a wholly different language game than that in which *phantasia*, as portrayed in *De Anima* has a role. This possibility led me back to Book I, *EN*, which introduces the concept of the soul to the discussion. In *EN*, the word for "soul" is almost always *autos* (autos), not *psyche* (yuch), as it almost always is in *DA*. The Liddell and Scotts translation of *autos* is "breath, " and of *psyche*, "breath," but also spirit as in sign of life, soul, mind, understanding, appetite. According to the Perseus Project at Tufts University (available over Netscape), the word "autos" appears 3237 times in Aristotle's works, while *psyche* appears 231 times, and is used almost exclusively in *DA*. The choice of different words for the term "soul" in these *EN* and *DA* again suggests to me that the story —the language game played in the two works — may be different.

Indeed, one notes that the discussion of the soul in *EN* is introduced at the end of Book I in chapter 13, which is entitled, “The psychological foundations of the virtues.” The description of the soul presented here—its division into two the two elements, the rational and the irrational, the division of the irrational into the vegetative and the “seat of the appetites,” and the rational into the seats of the intellectual and moral virtues — is, it seems, to offer us a road map so that the character of the virtues and their relations to other parts of the soul may be understood and located. The discussion of the soul, then, is really not a psychological story: it does not tell us how the various parts of the soul work.

The task of *DA* seems quite different. For here we do get a psychological story—a description of the soul in action. In this story, the imagination —*phantasia*—has a place: it brings images into play so that various sorts of thinking and perceiving can take place.

In summary, I am asking: As the aims of *EN* and *DA* are so different from one another, is it the case that a concept from one text can illuminate the meaning of the other text? The foregoing analysis suggests that we must consider the matter with some care. The concept *phantasia* is a concept that has a place in a psychological story (in *DA*) and is apparently grounded in sensory perception. To use it to illuminate the concept of *phronesis*, which is not part of a psychological story about how the mind works, may confuse or distort the meaning of *phronesis*, as it appears unrelated to sensory perception.

1. See my essay review of *Reason and Values: New Essays in Philosophy and Education*, J.P. Portelli and S. Beilin, eds. (Calgary: Detselig Enterprises, 1993, and *Re-thinking Reason: New Perspectives in Critical Thinking*, K.S. Walters, ed. (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1994); forthcoming, *Educational Theory*.

2. In Walters, *Re-thinking Reason*, 32-42.

3. *Ibid.*, 43-60.

4. See note 47 by Martin Otswald in his translation of *EN*, p. 30

5. Quotations from Aristotle, *EN*, are taken from the Otswald translation.

6. Martha Nussbaum, *Love's Knowledge: Essays on Philosophy and Literature* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1990), 82.

7. *Ibid.*, 77.

8. Translations of taken from W.S. Hett, Loeb edition.