



Phantasia and Perceptual Realism in Aristotle

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Abstract

Traditional interpretations of Aristotle's concept of *phantasia* have not resolved the two difficulties rooted in the *aisthesis-phantasia* distinction: (1) the paradox between *phantasia's* distinction from perception and its close relation to perception; (2) the tension between *phantasia* as an imaginative power (*eidolopoiein*) and as a power for sensory appearance (*phainemenon*), which seems indistinguishable from perception. In this article, I suggest that the *aisthesis-phantasia* distinction arises from Aristotle's need to explain the possibility of perceptual error while upholding the reliability of perception. The distinction lies between veridical perception and non-veridical *phantasia* and presupposes Aristotle's perceptual realism. This account provides a possible way out of the difficulties at issue, in which *phantasia* in the sense of fallible experience unifies both imaginative experience and inaccurate perceptions, and *phantasia's* both distinction from and association with perception are presented in answer to perceptual unreliability.

Keywords: Perception; *Phantasia*; Veridical perception; Perceptual reliability; Perceptual realism

Aristotle's concept of *phantasia* is frequently employed in his corpus, but its independent treatment is restricted to *De Anima* 3.3. This notoriously complex treatment portrays *phantasia* as a sensory faculty distinct from all other psychic faculties, yet responsible for an array of experiences such as imagination, memory, dreaming, desire, and thinking. Traditional critics variously accuse *De Anima* 3.3 of confusion, inconsistency, and failure to provide a unified concept [1-5]¹. Particularly, its alleged inconsistency includes an unsuccessful struggle to distinguish *phantasia* from perception [2,6-7]². On the contrary, many recent commentators, albeit along different lines, attempt to read *De Anima* 3.3 more charitably. They wish to do justice to the

text by drawing attention to its overall structure and goals: by fixing *phantasia's* intermediate position between perception and intellect, *De Anima* 3.3 rebuts the pre-Socratic theorists who identify perceiving and thinking, deepens Aristotle's theory of the sensory apparatus and its functions, and prepares for the subsequent exposition of rational behavior and animal action (3.4-11) [5,8-14]³.

Nevertheless, these readings, in presenting a consistent panorama, skirt the difficulties stemming from the *aisthesis-phantasia* distinction, only to downplay them. Specifically, (1) the paradox between Aristotle's intention to distinguish perception from *phantasia* and his acknowledgment of *phantasia's* close relation to perception; (2) the tension

1 Freudenthal 1863, 53, Hamlyn 1968, 131, and Nussbaum 1978, 223. See also reports in Watson 1988, 14 and Ferrarin 2006, 92.

2 Hamlyn 1968, 131, Ross 1995, 149, and Rees 1962, 12.

3 Schofield 1992, Modrak 1968, White 1985, Turnbull 1994, Rapp 2001, Ferrarin 2006, Shields 2012, Corcilius 2014, and Frede 2020.



between *phantasia* as an imaginative power (*eidolopoiein*) and as a power for sensory appearance (*phainomenon*), which seems indistinguishable from perception [12,14]⁴. Why is Aristotle desperate to prize apart perception and *phantasia* in spite of their inextricability? This paper examines the *aisthesis-phantasia* distinction in detail to address the two issues. I elaborate on the sense in which perception is different from *phantasia*, how the notion of non-veridical *phantasia*, as a response to the challenge of perceptual error [15]⁵ and the epistemic unreliability of perception, helps overcome the abovementioned difficulties (1) and (2), and how the *aisthesis-phantasia* distinction is founded on perceptual realism.

Perceptual Unreliability and *Phantasia* in *Metaphysics* 4.5

Perceptual errors are commonplace. We know we mistakenly perceive a straight stick in the water as bent or a large tower in the distance as small when we know what they really look like. But what if their “true appearances” are dubious as well? Sometimes we do confuse true and false appearances, but if a thing’s incompatible appearances were deemed epistemically equivalent, there would be no “true perception” at all. Perception would then not be an epistemically reliable approach to reality: we can never infer “it is red” from “it looks red”.

Since antiquity, when philosophers have assessed perception epistemologically, illusory experiences have invoked serious skepticism about the epistemic reliability of perception. For instance, the existence of perceptual error led Plato to draw the line between the constantly changing physical world and the stable ideal world [16]⁶, Epicureans to divide infallible sense impressions from fallible beliefs [17]⁷, and Stoics to set apart cognitive and non-cognitive impressions [17]⁸. Additionally, perceptual unreliability has sometimes incurred an outright rejection of the reality of sensible objects, i.e. perceptual anti-realism, epitomized by

the Heraclitean flux doctrine and the Protagorean thesis that “all appearances are true” [16]⁹. Either assuming that sensible objects are in a constant state of flux or that contradictory sense impressions are epistemically equivalent, the universe of sensible objects cannot be anything more than a fantasy or fabrication. Perceptual anti-realism agrees with the unreliability of perception because the lack of reality explains why sensible objects produce contradictory perceptions and so cannot provide the basis for epistemically reliable information.

The issue of perceptual unreliability confronts Aristotle as well. Aristotle acknowledges that perception is sometimes deceptive (*Metaphysics* 1010b19-30, *De Anima* 428a12-15, 428b2-5), but decides to explain this phenomenon differently. Notably, Aristotle refuses to equate perception and *phantasia*, as the Epicureans and Stoics do, or conflate perception, *phantasia*, and *doxa*, as Plato does¹⁰. Nor does he compromise the reliability of perception. Rather, he holds that perceptual reliability can be saved if we manage to distinguish reliable perception from the unreliable type of sensory experiences – *phantasiai/phantasmata*.

In his criticism of the Protagorean thesis that “all appearances are true” in *Metaphysics* 4.5, Aristotle blames this absurdity on the confusion between perception and *phantasia* (1010b1-14):

As for truth, to show that not every phenomenon (*phainomenon*) is true: first, even if perception, at least of what is proper, is not false, still *phantasia* is not the same thing as perception. Next, one may legitimately be surprised that they [Protagoreans and Heracliteans] should find perplexing the question whether magnitudes and colors are such as they appear to those who are at a distance or those who are near, and by the healthy or the sick; or whether what appears to the weak or the strong is heavier; or whether what appears to the sleeping or the waking is true. For it is obvious that they do not really consider it so: at any rate if someone in Libya supposes himself one night in Athens, he does not set off for the Odeon. Again, as for the future, as Plato also says, the opinions of a doctor and an ignorant man are surely not equally authoritative, as for instance on the question whether someone is or is not going to be healthy. (1010b1-14) [18,19]¹¹.

If all experiences were true, there would be no objective criteria of truth with which to adjudicate contradictory experiences, and all experiences would be true for different

4 Rapp 2001 and Frede 2020 propose two-concept interpretations of *phantasia* in response to this tension, suggesting their failure to unify these two senses. My account of non-veridical *phantasia* will unify these two senses, though I admit that this cannot be its only sense.

5 Caston 1996 maintains a similar view on the purpose of *phantasia*, but along a different line. He claims that dealing with perceptual error is the purpose of the whole chapter *De Anima* 3.3, while for me this is only the purpose of the *aisthesis-phantasia* distinction. *Phantasia*’s difference from *doxa* (427b16-24; 428a18-24), I suggest, serves to indicate that *phantasia* as a sensory faculty is without assent or commitment characteristic of rational faculties.

6 *Phaedo* 78b4-81a2, *Republic* 509d1-511e3 in Cooper 1997.

7 E.g., Sextus Empiricus, *Against the professors*, 8.63 in Long & Sedley 1987.

8 E.g., *Diogenes Laertius* 7.46 in Long & Sedley 1987.

9 *Theaetetus* 152c1-e10 in Cooper 1997.

10 Cf. 428a5-16 and notes 7-8; cf. 428a24-b9 and Plato’s view at *Sophist* 264a6.

11 Kirwan 1993’s translations and modified according to Ross 1924.

people and relative to different perspectives. By erasing the difference among all experiences, the Protagorean thesis makes the reliable type of perception, i.e. proper sensation, identical with fallible experiences which are *phantasiai*. However, even if proper sensations are almost always true, *phantasia* must be of a different type for Aristotle. He evidences the fallibility of *phantasia* by the fact that those who possess *phantasiai* are non-committal to their experiences: imagining he is in Athens, the Libyan is conscious of its imaginary nature and does not really believe it is the case, just as people who can discriminate scientific from unreliable medical opinions (1010b13-14). In their practical dealings, those Protagoreans and Heracliteans presuppose the unreliability of some experiences and are alert to the difference between reliable and unreliable experiences; it is only theoretically they treat all experiences indifferently.

Therefore, we see that Aristotle has no fundamental doubt about the reliability of perception – there must be some basic kinds of sensory experiences mirroring things as they are. What he has to do is harmonize the reliability of perception with its capricious character, and he means to do it with *phantasia*, which he takes to be derivative from perception. In *Metaphysics* 4.5, however, Aristotle does not expound on the nature of *phantasia* and its specific difference from perception. It is only in *De Anima* 3.3 that Aristotle embarks on this task, where he details the *aisthesis-phantasia* distinction (428a5-16) and draws the definition of *phantasia* from its causal dependence on perception (428b10-429a9). In what follows, I revisit these texts and demonstrate my view that the distinction in question stands between veridical perceptions and fallible experiences, based on Aristotle's deep-seated belief in perceptual realism.

The Aisthesis-Phantasia Distinction in De Anima 3.3

The immediate reason Aristotle distinguishes *phantasia* from perception in the context of *De Anima* 3.3 is to ascertain what it is to be *phantasia* (*ti esti*). Although *phantasia* is too closely associated with perception to differ from it (428b10-14), they should not be identical if *phantasia* is to be anything at all. Moreover, it has to be defined independently and with reference to its own objects (*antikeimena*) (*Independent Objects Principle, IOP*), as Aristotle stipulates regarding psychic faculties (415a14-20), if it is to be an individual psychic faculty at all. In other words, his argument for the *aisthesis-phantasia* distinction will hold true only if it can somehow tell the difference between their corresponding objects.

This task, however, is complicated by Aristotle's idea that *phantasia* and perception are physiologically inseparable, which can be evidenced by at least two facts. First,

Aristotle defines *phantasia* according to its causal relation to perception since *phantasia* is “of those things of which perception is” (428b12-13) and the act of *phantasia*, as the psycho-physical motion resultant from the act of perception, is similar to the latter (428b14). Perception and *phantasia* have similar and causally-related activities because they share the same *causal antecedents* – *aistheta*, which are the external agents or ‘movers’ of perceptual activities (*aisthesis*) and contents (*aisthemata*); they are similar because the original and residual motions caused by the same agents and occurring in the same place (central sense organ) are similar (*De Somno* 456a1-7)¹². *Phantasia* has *phantasmata* (fantastic experiences or their material bearers) as its contents (428a1-2) [15,20-23]¹³, whereas *phantasmata* are not objects in the sense of external agents, because *phantasiai*, as said, share the same external agents or causal antecedents with perception (428b12-13). That is why commentators rightly state that *phantasia* does not qualify as an individual faculty but a quasi-faculty: it cannot be defined by appeal to a special kind of external object as its causal antecedent [11,24]¹⁴. Second, Aristotle elsewhere concedes that *phantastikon* and *aisthetikon* are the same faculty with different “beings” or essences (*De Insomniis* 459a16-17), which seems to stem from the difficulty in dividing *phantastikon* from other parts of the soul at *De Anima* 3.9, 432a31-b3 [25]¹⁵. This identification can be explained by the fact that perception and *phantasia* share the same physiological apparatus – the same set of sense organs and causal antecedents – though performing different functions. Their functional difference somehow squares with their physiological inseparability.

In this situation, the only way to assign different “objects” for perception and *phantasia* is to identify different experiential contents, namely, to develop a justifiable account of the *aisthema-phantasma* distinction. That is, to modify *IOP*

12 Aristotle claims even proper sensation is accompanied by self-consciousness in the central organ (*De Anima* 425b12-25; *De Somno* 455a12-b2), indicating that for any perception to occur, motions in peripheral sense organs, i.e. *aisthemata*, must persist and lead to motions in the central organ. *Phantasmata*, in their material aspect, are said to be lingering motions in peripheral sense organs, which are carried back into the central organ (*De Insomniis* 460b2-3, 460b28-461a8).

13 Caston 2021 appropriately distinguishes the physiological movements themselves (*phantasmata*) and their imagistic visualization to emphasize the physiological basis of phantastic experiences.

14 For the ineligibility of *phantasia* as a separate faculty see also Frede 1992, 281 and Turnbull 1994, 322.

15 “And there is the *phantastikon*, which differs from them [nutritive and perceptual faculties] all in being, though there is considerable difficulty in saying—if one is going to posit separate parts of the soul—with which of the others it will be the same or from which of the others will it differ.” (432a31-b3, translated by Shields 2016 and modified.)

(*Modified Independent Objects Principle, MIOP*). This scheme is evidenced by the preliminary definition of *phantasia* at 428a1-2: *phantasia* enables us to entertain “a certain *phantasma*”. I hold that Aristotle establishes this when he describes the difference between veridical perceptions and non-veridical experiences, and this, more than anything else, is their real difference. In what follows, I will show that among Aristotle’s arguments for the *aisthesis-phantasia* distinction (428a5-16), the fourth one (428a12-15) conveys this difference, with the other four being, strictly speaking, insufficient. For the sake of reasoning, let me address these arguments in order.

That it [*phantasia*] is not perception, then, is clear from the following. [A1] For perception is either a potentiality or an actuality, such as sight and seeing; yet something may also appear even when neither of these is present, as in sleep. (428a5-8) [25]¹⁶

[A2] And there is also what we said earlier, that visual images (*horamata*) appear even to those whose eyes are closed. (428a15-16)

Aristotle taps into dreams in [A1] to signal that there are cases where an act of *phantasia* is not identifiable as or reducible to an act of perception. When we ‘see’ in a dream, we are not using our eyes, since bodily affections in sleep incapacitate the primary sense organ and we temporarily lose the capacity and actuality of sight (*De Somno* 455a8-10). Thus, ‘seeing’ in a dream does not count as seeing by sight. Still, we experience what we ‘see’ by virtue of *phantasia*. Extending the sense of *phantasia* to visualization broadly speaking (including memory and dream), [A2] offers a cross-reference to [A1] to express the same point. That is, when we are dreaming, memorizing, imagining, or hallucinating in a faint (*De Somno* 456a11-12), etc., we have visual experiences without using our sight by virtue of *phantasia*. In general, since sensory experiences occur without sensible objects as well, and *phantasia* is responsible for these experiences, *phantasiai* (or *phantasmata*) are different from perceptions, experiences concurrent with external objects.

Although [A1-A2], by pointing out cases of one without the other, is sufficient for claiming that perception and *phantasia* are not identical, it is still insufficient for proving their exclusive distinction as demanded by *MIOP*. For it does not prevent their overlap. This line of reasoning requires *phantasia* to be defined as visualization or imaginative experience free of external objects, but *phantasiai* are arguably more than imaginative experiences. At 428a12-15 and 428b2-5, Aristotle copes with cases like seeing a man indistinctly and mistaking the size of the sun, suggesting that he does not restrict the notion of *phantasia* to ‘visualization’

but holds it responsible for sensory experiences both with and without external agency. He is ready to explain phenomena such as illusions and indistinct perceptions with *phantasia* by analyzing the ordinary uses of ‘*phainesthai*’ and ‘*phantazesthai*’ in our opaque, distorted, and misleading perceptions [2,14,25,26]¹⁷. Since *phantasia* is more than visualization, [A1] and [A2] are inadequate for the *aisthesis-phantasia* distinction.

[B] Further, perception is always present, though *phantasia* is not. If these were the same in actuality, it would be possible for *phantasia* to belong to all beasts; but this does not seem to be the case. For instance, it belongs to the ant or the bee, but not to the grub. (428a8-11)

[B] claims that perception belongs to all animals (“always present”) while *phantasia* is not thus ubiquitous, so they cannot be the same faculty. Otherwise, all sentient animals would necessarily possess *phantasia*, given that animals are sentient by definition. Aristotle believes that not all animals have *phantasia*: there are sentient animals with no *phantasia*, like grubs. While [A1] and [A2] exploit examples of ‘pure’ *phantasia* in which we find no sense-perceiving, like dreams, [B] turns to those ‘pure’ perceptions, like grub’s sensation, unadulterated by *phantasia*. The moral of [B] is clear: insofar as there is *any* such pure perception, perception *per se* is something distinct from *phantasia*; perception can and should be independently defined with no reference to *phantasia*.

However, Aristotle later attenuates the premise that some sentient animals have no *phantasia*, which undermines [B]. Although *De Anima* 2.3 balks at the inference from perception to *phantasia* (414b15-16; 415a10-11),¹⁸ this hesitation contradicts a positive testimony in 2.2.¹⁹ Later in

17 Aristotle states that by virtue of *phantasia* ‘a certain *phantasma*’ which is said not metaphorically occurs in us (428a1-2). Commentators usually take the ‘metaphorical’ use of *phantasia/phantasma* to refer to an extended use that covers the sense of perception (and even other rational activities involving images), making imaginative experiences the non-metaphorical and non-extended use of *phantasia/phantasma* (Hamlyn 1968, 131, Hicks 1907, 460, Shields 2016, 281). This statement is thus brought to support a deflationary reading of *phantasia* which restricts its sense to imagination or imaginative experience. But this cannot be true given Aristotle’s consideration of illusory experiences; worse yet, the fact that Aristotle draws attention to illusory experiences and drops the sense of “visualization” in the rest of the chapter suggests the opposite. That is, the metaphorical use dismissed here refers back to the imaginative capacity, and Aristotle recommends adopting a broader sense, which is the non-metaphorical use of *phantasia* he will turn to. See also Frede 2020, 58.

18 “To those living things which have touch, desire belongs as well. But regarding *phantasia* things are not clear. One must inquire into that later” (414b15-16) ... “Rather, *phantasia* does not belong to some, while others live by this alone.” (415a10-11)

19 “For each of the parts [of an insect] has perception and motion with respect

16 Translated by Shields 2016 and modified.

De Anima 3.10-11, the premise is rejected by the confession that *all animals possess phantasia* even though imperfect animals have only indeterminate *phantasia*.²⁰ The argument runs as follows: animal actions are initiated by desire, and desire is triggered by *phantasiai*, because animals detect objects of desire by sensorily or rationally representing them (*phantasiai*) (see also *De Motu Animalium* 702a15-19). However, what about stationary animals that possess only touch and are called ‘imperfect animals’ (433b31-434a1)?²¹ Do they also require desire and *phantasia*, if they do not move at all? Aristotle affirms that they *should* have them, insofar as they are witnessed to have pleasure and pain as indicators of desire, though the *phantasia* based only on touch would be non-visual and vague [27]²². Consequently, since all animals have *phantasia* together with perception, [B] is deficient in establishing the distinction at issue.

[C] Further, perceptions are always true, whereas *phantasiai* are for the most part false. (428a11-12)

Taken literally, the claim that perceptions are always true while *phantasiai* are mostly false clashes directly with the forthcoming *De Anima* 3.3, 428b18-30: among three kinds of perception, only proper sensations (sensations proper to each sense organ) can be ‘almost always true’. Among three corresponding kinds of *phantasia*, despite the other two kinds being fallible, *phantasiai* from proper sensations are still true whenever their agents, proper sensibles, are present. For example, the sentence ‘it appears (*phainetai*) green’ is as true as ‘it looks green’ insofar as the green thing is present. “*Phantasiai*” in [C] might be taken to be imaginative experiences that are always ‘false’, namely, referring to no actual things, but this reading makes [C] a superfluous

to place, and if perception, then also *phantasia* and desire; for wherever there is perception, there is also both pain and pleasure; and wherever these are, of necessity there is appetite as well.” (413b21-24)

20 “Insofar as an animal is capable of desire, it is, in virtue of this, capable of moving itself; but it is not capable of desire without *phantasia*. And all *phantasia* is either rational or sensory. And in this latter, then, the other animals have a share as well.” (433b27-30)

“It is also necessary to consider what initiates motion in imperfectly developed animals, those whose perception is limited to touch; whether or not it is possible for them to have *phantasia* and appetite. For they appear to have pleasure and pain in them; but if they have these, then it is necessary that they have appetite as well. But how could they have *phantasia* in them? Or rather, just as they are moved indeterminately, these things are present in them, but present indeterminately. Hence, as we said, while sensory *phantasia* belongs to the other animals [i.e. including imperfect animals], deliberative *phantasia* belongs to rational animals.” (433b31-434a7)

21 Mobile and sessile animals differ in whether having touch only or having also indirect senses, see 434b22-27.

22 See Papachristou 2013 on the indeterminate *phantasia* of imperfect animals.

repetition since [A1] and [A2] have already argued the same point. Thus, if we are going to make sense of [C], it should at least spell out what will be confirmed at 428b18-30, that is, the comparison that proper sensations are always true while *phantasiai* of complex things are mostly fallible (prone to error).²³ But this reading is no doubt forced. What is uttered is either an implausible point that contradicts other texts or a repetition of an inadequate point [A1-A2]. [C] cannot justify the distinction at issue either.

[D] Again, we do not say that this appears to us to be a man whenever we are in a state of actuality accurately in relation to the sensible object, but rather whenever we do not perceive clearly whether it is true or false. (428a12-15) [26,28,29]²⁴

Agreeing with some commentators, I contend that [D] voices the real difference between *phantasia* and perception [8,9,11,12,13]²⁵ Unlike [A] and [C], now *phantasia* is implicated in the explanation of perceptual error that takes place when we sense-perceive instead of imagine, and *phantasia*’s falsehood is not just “the absence of objects”. [D] claims that whenever we see a man accurately and confidently, we do not say “it appears to be a man” but “we sense-perceive a man”, from which it concludes that perceptions *insofar as they are veridical* are distinct from fallible experiences (“whether it is true or false”) which are *phantasiai*. Perceptual error happens, then, whenever we are taken in by fallible perceptions and judge wrongly, confusing “sense-perceiving” with “appearing” and judging mistakenly.

23 Proper sensations are always true because, by definition (*De Anima* 2.5 and 2.12), they have no way to go astray in accepting the imprint of proper objects (e.g., colors and sounds). As regards proper sensations, we cannot meaningfully speak of the correspondence between contents (*aisthemata*) and objects (*aistheta*) because mismatch is impossible. On the contrary, representation of complex things – ordinary things and events – we grasp by predicative perception (*aisthesis kata sumbebekos*), is prone to error (428b20-21).

24 ἐπειτ’ οὐδὲ λέγομεν, ὅταν ἐνεργῶμεν ἀκριβῶς περὶ τὸ αἰσθητόν, ὅτι φαίνεται τοῦτο ἡμῖν ἄνθρωπος, ἀλλὰ μᾶλλον ὅταν μὴ ἐναργῶς αἰσθανόμεθα πότερον ἀληθὴς ἢ ψευδής. Cf. Ross 1956, Hicks 1907, and Jannone 1966 ad loc.: whether it is true or false (ποτερόν ἀληθὴς ἢ ψευδής) (Ross); then it is either true or false (τότε ἢ ἀληθὴς ἢ ψευδής) (Hicks); then both the true and false perception apply (τότε καὶ ἢ ἀληθὴς καὶ ἢ ψευδής) (Jannone). According to Hicks’ and Jannone’s editions, people are tempted to believe that there is true or false only when *phantasia* occurs, so perception is always true. Perhaps they intend to make [D] dovetail with [C] which claims “perception is always true”. But taking this pain is gratuitous because Aristotle explicitly says perception is fallible.

25 Modrak 1968, 51-52, 67, Schofield 1992, 260, Turnbull 1994, 320. Cf. Corcilius 2014, 74-75 who, in his rehearsal of the *aisthesis-phantasia* distinction, unfairly leaves out [D], in order to underline the imaginative aspect of *phantasia*; also Rapp 2001, 93 who, taking the basic sense of *phantasia* as imaginative ability, blames [D]’s confusion and hesitates to admit the role of *phantasia* in perceptual error.

“Veridical perception”, as [D] suggests, refers to sensory experiences simultaneously with and corresponding to external sensible objects, especially when it comes to ordinary things.²⁶ “Veridical” implies (1) the accuracy of perceptual contents and the correspondence between contents and objects, as well as (2) the subjective feeling of distinctness and confidence indicative of our access to sensible reality. For instance, I veridically see Hippias if and only if I see it as Hippias, I do not doubt it, and the external thing is Hippias. However, when I am unsure if that is Hippias (“it seems to be him”), my perceptual experience is fallible and a *phantasia* or *phantasma*. As confidence is involved in the accuracy of perceptual experiences, veridical perceptions already possess the element of assent (*pistis*) characteristic of belief (*doxa*), in terms of which belief is distinguished from non-committal *phantasia* (428a18-24).²⁷ In contrast, the feeling of uncertainty is a consequence of fallibility. To put it in a nutshell, perception is strictly distinct from *phantasia* because there are cases in which veridical perceptions, being (1) accurate and (2) assent-bearing, are distinct from fallible and non-committal *phantasiai*.

Inaccurate perceptions (“it seems to be”) are fallible and deceptive (tempting us to err), but they are not simply false perceptions. As “can be false” does not mean “is false”, inaccurate experiences are fallible instead of false. False perceptions, like veridical perceptions, already contain assent: it is only when I believe my perceptual experiences to be the case that they can be true or false according to the case. By contrast, a fallible *phantasia* needs not be a false view (*doxa*), and fallible experiences are not necessarily false. When I glimpse, say, Hippias and say “it seems to be Lysis”, and Hippias is actually over there, I am not thereby asserting a false belief that “it is Lysis”. *Phantasia* accounts for perceptual error by opening up the possibility of error: our perceptual apparatus may provide us with misleading information in a “fantastic” state of mind, without which there will be no perceptual error, but it is belief, not *phantasia*, that makes the mistake of accepting this information.²⁸ Hence, it is not false but fallible experiences that are *phantasiai* and distinguished from veridical perceptions.

Although inaccurate perceptions figure prominently in the account of perceptual error, *phantasia* in the sense of

fallible experience extends beyond inaccurate perceptions. Let me explain. Veridical perceptions by Aristotle’s standards, I argue, exclude imaginative experiences (such as memories, imaginations, dreams, and hallucinations) on the one hand and inaccurate perceptions on the other, so both classes belong to *phantasiai* due to their fallibility. When I am veridically looking at something, I can neither hesitate over nor imagine this thing at the same time. Obviously, it is impossible that I know I am looking at *something* and still feel uncertain about whether it exists. But what if I imagine something is the case (e.g., “I think a tree is now in your courtyard”) and guess right? Will it not be veridical? Still, even if I guess right, it is testified afterward. I risk being wrong and cannot be confident when I am imagining. Imaginative experiences cannot be veridical in this strict sense given their fallibility and non-committal attitude, as they can operate independently of external objects ([A1-2] and [C]) and project mental images at will (427b17-24). Veridical perceptions, thus, are neither imaginative experiences nor inaccurate perceptions, both of which are *phantasiai* in terms of their fallibility.

To sum up, Aristotle introduces a rigorous notion of veridical perception by which *phantasia*, in the sense of fallible experience, is demarcated. That is, an experience is marked as a fallible *phantasia* and a period of *phantasma* through lack of the intrinsic features of a veridical perception; such experiences turn out to be both imaginative experiences and inaccurate perceptions. While the notion of veridical perception safeguards the epistemic reliability of perception, the notion of *phantasia* makes room for the possibility of perceptual error and thus explains the consistency between perceptual reliability and perceptual error. Besides, this account offers a unified sense of *phantasia* to reconcile the incompatibility between *phantasia* as visualization and as sensory appearance, which, as I mentioned at the beginning, is one of the two difficulties in *De Anima* 3.3. Moreover, this account proves to have abided by *MIOP*, as the distinction between veridical and fallible experiences clarifies the *aisthema-phantasma* distinction and the preliminary definition of *phantasia* (428a1-2) whereby *phantasia* is defined [9]²⁹.

With this account in mind, we can now better understand Aristotle’s closing remarks on the affinity between perception and *phantasia* (428b10-429a2). Here, since perceptions of three kinds of objects are fallible to various degrees (428b18-25), from three kinds of perceptual fallibility derive three kinds of fallible experience (428b25-30). In a word, we

26 Although proper sensations are a fortiori veridical by these standards, this notion of veridical perception fits perception of ordinary things better. Whereas proper sensations are in a way, “incapable” of being false, perceptions of ordinary things imply predicative perception (*aisthesis kata sumbebekos*) which predicates one item of another and admits of error (428b18-22).

27 That said, perception is arguably not identical with belief, since belief has wider scope and extends to imperceptible things.

28 *De Insomniis* 460b16-27, 461b4-8.

29 This account is in principle similar to Modrak 1968, 49: “the awareness of a sensory content under conditions that are not conducive to veridical perception”, but I try to further it by digging into the perceptual-realist framework in the next section.

draw fallible experiences (*phantasiai*) from sense-perceiving whenever it is unreliable and prone to error (428b14-18). To illustrate, when I am looking at a dim contour of Hippias and hold that “it seems to be Hippias”, I get this ambiguous appearance (fallible *phantasia*) from my viewing activity in unfavorable viewing conditions (fallible perception) [14]³⁰.

No doubt, the *aisthesis-phantasia* distinction is in tune with *phantasia's* association with perception, and the same concern lies behind the two arguments (428a5-16, 428b10-429a2), which is the harmony between perceptual error and perceptual reliability. The paradox between the *aisthesis-phantasia* distinction and their association is thus resolved. Perception may fail to access sensible reality (in different ways), and the occurrence of perceptual error rules out such experiences from the class of “perceptions”, i.e. veridical perceptions. On this account, Aristotle is driven to admit a fallible and non-committal kind of experience generated by the sense-perceiving activity, i.e. *phantasia*, to accommodate perceptual error and keep the reliability of veridical perception intact. Perceptual reliability, therefore, is guaranteed by the notion of veridical perception which is a sign of human beings’ immanent capacity to access sensible reality.

Perceptual Realism

It is already clear that the relation between veridical and non-veridical experiences is asymmetric. *Phantasia* is characterized and differentiated not by its own inherent characteristics but by what it is to be a veridical perception. To understand the nature of veridical perception, we need to identify the criteria for what qualifies as a veridical perception. I will show in this section that the nature of veridical perception, thereby the distinction between veridical perception and *phantasia*, presupposes Aristotle’s account of perceptual realism.

Modrak identifies a threefold set of criteria for what sensory experiences are non-veridical *phantasiai*: (a) an external object is acting upon the percipient but the external conditions are insufficient, e.g. the excessive distance from the object, for a veridical perception to happen; (b) an external object is acting upon the percipient but the internal conditions are insufficient, e.g. being feverish or overly emotional, for a veridical perception to happen; (c) no external object is acting upon the percipient when she is experiencing [9]³¹.

30 So, there is no oddity as Frede (2020) believes when Aristotle claims that *phantasia* is an “after-image” of perception, he also pronounces the “simultaneity” between perception and *phantasia* (428b25-30).

31 Modrak 1968, 52.

Accordingly, a veridical perception should happen if an external object is acting upon the percipient and both external and internal conditions are sufficient for her to perceive the object exactly as it is. However, what constitutes external and internal sufficiency is not fixed *a priori* but contextually dependent. In one sense, these conditions could be infinite; in another, being part of these conditions depends on what the object in each case is and what facilitates its cognition. This means that we neither need nor can enumerate these conditions *before* discerning what it is to have a veridical perception. Instead, identifying veridical perceptions in every case essentially depends on the overarching criterion—what the external object is, and whether it is accurately reflected in perceptual content.

At this juncture, we might be tempted by contemporary views, such as phenomenalism and representationalism, to claim that what the object is should instead be determined by both external and internal conditions. Conceivably, we might think that we perceive things only by representing them, and the way we represent things partly determines how they appear to us, whether or not their appearances *are* themselves *per se*.³² However, Aristotle is impervious to this sort of challenge if he takes a firm stance on his perceptual realism. Despite recent trends to interpret Aristotle’s perception as ‘representationalism’ [30]³³, ‘moderate Protagoreanism’ [31]³⁴, or ‘subtle realism’³⁵, I ally myself with the majority who defend Aristotle’s perceptual realism in this debate [22,32-35]³⁶.

In general, perceptual realism claims that what we perceive by senses (perceptual contents) reveals what perceptible things really are in themselves (perceptible objects), independent of our perception. In particular, Aristotle’s perceptual realism asserts that sensible objects exist independently of perception, causally initiate perceptual activity, and partly determine perceptual contents by directly transmitting proper objects (*Categories* 7, 7b15-8a12; *De Anima* 2.5 and 12). Indeed, we may think a red thing stops being red if nobody is looking at it. The redness’ power to be perceived as red cannot actualize itself without actually being seen, so perceiving and being perceived share the same actuality, i.e., the same act (*De Anima* 3.2, 426a2-11). Since perceptible objects derive their essences from their

32 For phenomenalism, what things are in themselves are their appearances; for representationalism, they are still different. But they all deny that reality has an independent existence.

33 Ganson 2020.

34 Gottlieb 1993.

35 Mamodoro 2014.

36 Broadie 1993, Esfeld 2000, Caston 2018, and Gregoric 2019. Caston 2018 provides an overview of this debate.

correlation to perception (*Categories* 7, 6b35), and actual being-perceived cannot exist without actual perceiving, one might suspect the objectivity of perceptible objects. However, Aristotle claims that the objectivity of perceptible objects is underwritten by the underlying things to which these sensible features adhere:

And in general, if in fact only the perceptible object (*aistheton*) exists, nothing would exist unless living things existed; for there would be no perception. Now, it is doubtless true that [if so] neither perceptible objects nor perceptual contents (*aisthemata*) (which are an affection of a perceiver) would exist; but that the underlying things (*hupokeimena*) which produce perception would not exist, even in the absence of perception, is impossible. For perception is not of itself, but there is some other thing too apart from perception, which necessarily prior to perception; for what changes something is prior in nature to the thing changed, and this is no less even if they are called these things correlative to one another. (*Metaphysics* 4.5, 1010b30-1011a2)

Had there never been perceivers and perceptual activities, no perceptual contents of course would have existed; perceptible objects, insofar as they are actually being perceived, e.g. redness actually seen, would have never existed either. However, the red thing would not thereby cease to be red. Its visibility would be unaffected, simply because it, as the underlying material thing, would not thereby disappear when perception disappeared. In other words, although the actualities of perceptible objects and perception are ontologically simultaneous, their potentialities are not (*De Anima* 3.2, 426a20-25); the perceptibility of perceptible things is ontologically independent owing to their independent material substrata.

Since perceptible objects are real, we have veridical perceptions when we accurately describe these objects, so my perception of something as, say, red is true if and only if this thing *is* red at the moment. *De Anima* 2.6 and 3.1 spell out what Aristotle's sensible objects are. (1) Basic objects are those directly acting upon us (*aistheta kath' hautou*), including those proper to each sense organ (*ta idia*), like colors and sounds, and those common to more than one sense organ (*ta koina*), like shape and magnitude. (2) Complex objects are constructed from fundamental ones by predication (*aistheta kata sumbebekos*). For instance, this yellow thing is bitter, and this white thing is Diars. By predication (*kata sumbebekos*), we perceive sensible compounds of proper and common objects, which reflect ordinary things in the world, such as the yellow, bitter bile, and white Diars.

In contrast to the other two types of sensible objects, proper objects are the most fundamental, for 'that which psycho-physically moves each sense organ' forms the strictest sense of 'sensible object', from which the other two

derive their essences (418a24-25). Common objects are what accompany more than one proper object, and objects by predication (*aistheta kata sumbebekos*) result from associating proper objects with additional features. Proper sensations are infallible or nearly infallible, whereas the other two kinds are mistakable (428b18-25), which renders proper objects least susceptible to phenomenalist and anti-realist attacks. Aristotle highlights the fundamental status of proper sensations:

In the case of our perceptions themselves, the perception of what is alien and proper, or of what is neighboring and what is its own, are not equally authoritative, but in the case of color it is sight, not taste, and in the case of flavor taste, not sight; and each of these never asserts about the same thing in the same time that it is simultaneously so-and-so and not so-and-so (1010b14-19).

For instance, when sight discerns redness, at the very moment it is certain that there is a piece of redness. Since there is no way for this perception to change simultaneously into an awareness of non-redness, it is impossible for the same thing to be red and not red simultaneously, as perceptual anti-realists might assume. At least at the level of proper sensation, perception is a reliable channel for sensible reality, and what it channels, i.e. proper objects, are unquestionably real. Proper sensations, thus, provide clear evidence for the reliability of perception and the reality of sensible objects, even though predicative perception of something belonging to something is still subject to falsity³⁷.

Nonetheless, the hierarchy of three types of sensible objects does not imply a temporal sequence in which our ordinary perception must proceed from the fundamental to the secondary objects. Although Aristotle does not lay down a theory of how we sense-perceive ordinary things like a horse or a landscape, he does underscore the role of common sense (*koinē dunamis*) in sense-perceiving complex objects when answering why one single sense capacity can simultaneously correlate with several proper objects (*De Anima* 2.1-2, 2.7, 431a17-b1, and *De Sensu* 7). Presumably, both common and predicative perceptions will be demanded in an act of perceiving, say, the man Cleon together with his action, as they bind different items in different ways [36-39]³⁸. Our ordinary perceptions, therefore, do not start with

37 "Nor, even in another time, was there dispute about the affection [proper sensations], but only about that in which the affection coincides; I mean for instance that the same wine might seem sweet at one time and not sweet at another, if there is a change either in it or in the [human] body; but the sweet such as it is, when it is, has never yet changed, and one always has the truth about it, and anything that is going to be sweet is such of necessity." (1010b19-30)

38 Scholars stress the role of both common sense (Kahn 1966, Modrak 1981, and Marmodoro 2014) and predicative perception (Cashdollar 1973) in recon-

discrete color sensations and build them up temporally, but grasp the entire images of ordinary things at once.

More importantly, this hierarchy should not be misconstrued as implying a sense-datum or idealist theory. It does not suggest that proper objects are *objective* and the other two kinds are *subjective* constructions, as if proper sensations alone, being infallible, report reality, whereas the other two kinds merely interpret reality and construct ideas about it. Aristotle's talk of perceptual truth in *De Anima* 3.3, 428b18-30 contains no such idea. Instead, from three types of perceptions being differently fallible truth-bearers, we can only infer that there are three kinds of sensible objects acting as truth-makers and yielding perceptions with varying degrees of reliability.³⁹ Hence, external sensible objects include proper objects, common objects, and objects by predication, and all serve as criteria for veridical perceptions.

Aristotle's own examples of perceptual illusion help illuminate his perceptual realism and the notion of veridical perception. First, a figure may appear to be, say, Hippias from a distance but turn out to be Lysis upon closer inspection (428a14). What individualizes Hippias at the perceptual level is a set of comparatively fixed sensible features: his stature, shape, color, clothing, facial features, sound, etc. These features serve to verify a perception of him. Thus, I veridically perceive Hippias if and only if I experience 'Hippias' in Hippias' physical presence, that is, if and only if some or all of his sensible features are present in my perceptual contents while he is present. In reverse, if I somehow experience Lysis' features in Hippias' presence, I have a deceptive *phantasia*. Second, the sun appears to be one foot in diameter but is actually larger than the Earth (428b2). Due to the foreshortening effects, the perceptible size of a thing may be deceptive. Still, the sun has its real size, even if its accurate perception is practically impossible. As long as my perception of the sun's size ("one foot") fails to reflect its actual magnitude, my perception of this "common object" is an illusion. Third, the land may appear to be moving past me as I sail past it (*De Insomniis* 460b26). The appearance of the passing land is illusory since the land, of course, remains stationary while I am in motion, and the relative movement between the boat and the land distorts my perception. My perception of the "object by predication" (i.e., "the land is moving"), is deceived under these adverse conditions. These examples clarify Aristotle's principle: a

perception is veridical and different from a *phantasia* if it corresponds accurately to perceptible reality, which consists of three kinds of sensible objects. These objects constitute reality and provide the standard of truth in sensory experience. Besides, the case study illustrates Aristotle's point that perceptions of common objects and objects by predication are significantly more prone to error than those of proper objects, with the former being the most fallible (428b19-25). Our ability to discern sensible compounds and events by predicative perception usually fails because we misperceive the common objects within.⁴⁰

Conclusion

Traditional interpretations of Aristotle's concept of *phantasia* and *De Anima* 3.3 are ineffective in addressing two difficulties: (1) the paradoxical relation between perception and *phantasia*; (2) the incompatibility between *phantasia* in the sense of imaginative experience and appearance. The interpretation I offer seeks to overcome these two difficulties by focusing on the *aisthesis-phantasia* distinction and looking at this distinction as a response to the challenge of perceptual unreliability. I claim that this distinction arises from Aristotle's need to explain the possibility of perceptual error while upholding the reliability of perception. It lies between veridical perception and non-veridical *phantasia* and rooted in Aristotle's perceptual realism. Aristotle does not justify perceptual realism through this distinction but rather builds this distinction on the foundation of perceptual realism. This account of *phantasia* provides a possible way to resolve the difficulties at issue: (1) *phantasia* in the sense of fallible experience unifies both imaginative experience and inaccurate perceptions; (2) *phantasia's* distinction from and association with perception are both drawn in answer to the challenge of perceptual unreliability.

As fallible *phantasia* safeguards the epistemic reliability and the cognitive value of veridical perception, this *phantasia* is itself non-cognitive: we are not expected to discern reality by this unreliable means. However, this notion still faces the challenge of having to explain the positive role of *phantasia* in Aristotle's doctrine of concept formation (*Metaphysics* 1.1, *Posteriors Analytics* 2.19, *De Anima* 3.8), which demands a notion of cognitive *phantasia*. I suggest it is rather the task of

structuring Aristotle's theory of ordinary perception. Note that by 'Cleon' (425a25) and 'Diores' (418a21) Aristotle does not mean the substantial form of Diores but only the sensible compound or the compound of sensible forms we perceive and designate 'Diores'.

39 According to Aristotle's correspondence theory of truth, cognition is true only by corresponding to reality.

40 However, there is a controvertible case. Two crossed fingers appear to be two to touch but one to sight (*Metaphysics* 1011a34; *De Insomniis* 460b20). Among proper sensations, sight is more authoritative than touch so visual grasps of common objects are more privileged than tactile grasps to claim truth, to the effect that the visual pronunciation that 'it is one bundle' demotes the tactile pronunciation that 'there are two things' to a mere illusion. But this visual superiority can be accepted only if we prefer one description to another, forcing the fact to be 'it is one bundle'.

rescuing perceptual reliability from the phenomenalist and skepticist accusations that cries for a notion of non-veridical *phantasia* in *De Anima* 3.3, for which reason a notion of cognitive *phantasia* has to be left undeveloped there. But this task cannot be the only one for Aristotle's *phantasia* to fulfil.

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