
Reviewed by Daniel P. Maher (Assumption University)

Published on H-Sci-Med-Tech (April, 2024)

Commissioned by Penelope K. Hardy (University of Wisconsin-La Crosse)

Aristotle's murky account of intellect in *De Anima* 3.4–5 has been controversial for centuries, and perhaps the next murkiest part of that text is the preceding chapter in which he discusses *phantasia*, which is usually translated as "imagination." While everyone recognizes its importance for human thinking and for Aristotle's account of the human soul, the text is far from clear. In *The Invention of the Imagination: Aristotle, Geometry, and the Theory of the Psyche*, Justin Humphreys argues that Aristotle here *invents* (as distinct from *discovers*) the imagination. "Whereas Plato had assumed that the power of appearing was a property of things, Aristotle makes it a part of the psyche" (p. 48). According to Humphreys, Aristotle invents imagination to account for how geometers engage with diagrams as they solve problems and prove theorems. Once invented for this speculative purpose, it shaped the way Aristotle (and ultimately the rest of us) understood other aspects of human awareness and especially our moral acts.

Humphreys unfolds his argument over eight chapters. In the first, he surveys pre-Aristotelian treatments of images and appearances in the Greek tradition. He gives extended attention to Plato and concentrates on the problem of the status of mathematical objects, which appear to be, in Aristotle's report of Platonic thinking, intermediate between sensible particulars and unchanging forms. In the second chapter, he refines the problem in geometry: "The paradox at the heart of the academic practice of making geometry scientific is thus how to maintain an ontology of ideal, unchanging, geometrical objects and, at the same time, perform operations on those objects that 'alter' them" (p. 28). He turns then to Aristotle's *De Anima* and related texts. Aristotle, he observes, divides the powers of the soul by reference to the soul's several activities, which in turn are understood by reference to the objects on which they act. Humphreys takes Aristotle to be introducing imagination as a power that makes present to
us and enables us to manipulate the figures we need to consider as we engage in geometry.

The greatest difficulty for this interpretation is that Humphreys has no textual evidence for it. Appeals to mathematics are not foreign to *De Anima*, and Aristotle does introduce imagination in order to account for human thinking. But Humphreys merely asserts that Aristotle introduces imagination to solve the geometrical paradox. Sometimes he puts his thesis conditionally: "If the theory of the imagination was originally formulated by Aristotle to accomplish the peculiar tasks set by scientific geometry ..." (p. 48). Nevertheless, on the same page he offers the thesis as an established fact that we are likely to overlook. One piece of evidence against Humphreys' view: Aristotle says imagination is widespread if not universal in all sensate beings, and so it would be odd if he invented it to explain geometry, which is uniquely human.

In chapter 3, Humphreys discusses Aristotle's definition of phantasia: "a movement which comes to be in virtue of the actualization of perception" (p. 44, quoting 429a1–2). In connection with this, he cites Aristotle's *On Dreams* (458a16–21) according to which the imaginative power (phantastikon) is the same as the power of perception (aisthétikon), although the essence of each is different. Later, Humphreys ignores this text when he insists that Aristotle makes the imagination a power distinct from perception. At that point in chapter 4, entitled "Dreaming and Day-Dreaming," Humphreys fills out his understanding of imagination by appeal to several works in the *Parva Naturalia* and in distinction from various other interpreters.

Chapter 5 ("Abstracting") and chapter 6 ("Geometrical Thinking") spell out Humphreys's grasp of the way imagination works with nous as we think intelligibles within sense perception and mathematical forms in or through diagrams and imagined manipulations of them. These passages are marred by some imprecision in the language. For example, in speaking of the theorem that the internal angles of a triangle are equal to two right angles, Humphreys says, the "diagram proves the universal proposition," which confuses the rational force of the proof with the visible signs that assist us in grasping the proof (p. 76). Humphreys holds that the geometer begins with a diagram that is particular, and the imagination generates a phantasm that introduces variations or affections in the initial drawing, which makes universal inferences possible. Unlike Descartes, who cannot imagine a chiliagon although he can understand one distinctly, Humphreys speaks of the geometrical objects about which geometers prove theorems as "in the imagination" (p. 86).

Chapters 7, 8, and 9 speak of Aristotle's "application of imagination in ethics" (p. 88). The first of these chapters is devoted to wishing, in which Humphreys delineates the role of imagination in identifying objects we might pursue as good. Chapter 8 treats deliberation, which he analogizes to analysis in geometrical reasoning, where one begins with the result one needs and works back to what would have to be the case for that result to be achieved. The final chapter addresses the treatment of shame by appeal to the *Eudemian* and *Nicomachean Ethics* as well as the *Rhetoric*.

A prologue and an epilogue frame the discussion with reference to post-Aristotelian developments. "The upshot of this argument is, in a way, that the imagination was itself only ever imagined. Such a general power of cognition, of mindedness, never really picked out a distinct capacity of mind" (p. 127). The latter sentence expresses something fairly close to the mainstream reading of Aristotle that Humphreys explicitly rejects. He does not explain how we should re-understand geometric reasoning once we have dismissed "Aristotle's concoction" (p. 125). The epilogue urges us to admit we do not know what we are saying when we attribute things to imagination. Perhaps Aristotle himself was aware of the difficulties and left us an obscure account of
phantasia deliberately. His traditional nickname of "cuttlefish" is not without justification.

This is a book for Aristotle scholars who want to explore what Aristotle meant by phantasia. Humphreys displays familiarity with a range of secondary literature, but his engagement with it is usually not technical and detailed. For the most part, he is laying out his own reading. While I do not find his central thesis convincing, Humphreys has identified texts and issues that must be faced as we try to make sense of Aristotle's thoughts on phantasia.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at https://networks.h-net.org/h-sci-med-tech


URL: https://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=60218

This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License.