

5-2011

# Commentary on Ward's Interpretation of 'De Anima' III 3

Myrna Gabbe

*University of Dayton*, [mgabbe1@udayton.edu](mailto:mgabbe1@udayton.edu)

Follow this and additional works at: [https://ecommons.udayton.edu/phl\\_fac\\_pub](https://ecommons.udayton.edu/phl_fac_pub)



Part of the [Philosophy Commons](#)

---

## eCommons Citation

Gabbe, Myrna, "Commentary on Ward's Interpretation of 'De Anima' III 3" (2011). *Philosophy Faculty Publications*. 107.  
[https://ecommons.udayton.edu/phl\\_fac\\_pub/107](https://ecommons.udayton.edu/phl_fac_pub/107)

This Conference Paper is brought to you for free and open access by the Department of Philosophy at eCommons. It has been accepted for inclusion in Philosophy Faculty Publications by an authorized administrator of eCommons. For more information, please contact [frice1@udayton.edu](mailto:frice1@udayton.edu), [mschlangen1@udayton.edu](mailto:mschlangen1@udayton.edu).

## Commentary on Ward

Myrna Gabbe

Any interpretation of Aristotle's φαντασία should aim to account for the unusual presentation he gives of it in *De Anima* III 3. The procedure of this chapter is not typical to his investigations into the soul's faculties. His accounts usually proceed from an examination of its objects, since they determine the nature and character of its activities.<sup>1</sup> But Aristotle does not clearly state what the objects of φαντασία are, leading some scholars to conclude that it has no objects of its own and, hence, is not a genuine or full faculty.<sup>2</sup> Instead of detailing its objects, he begins the chapter with the argument that his predecessors cannot account for the possibility of error because they take sense-perceiving (αἰσθάνεσθαι) to be identical to understanding (φρονεῖν, 427a21-22). Φαντασία is abruptly introduced in the course of this discussion. After distinguishing sense-perception from understanding (φρονεῖν) and thinking (νοεῖν), Aristotle writes, "For φαντασία is different from sense-perception and discursive thought" (427b14-15). He then turns his attention to φαντασία, but to specify, at least initially, what it is not. The negative analysis effectively provides a list of features φαντασία *can* have; however, we are left to wonder which of these features are essential to it, if any. It is only in the last section of the chapter beginning at 428b10 that Aristotle provides something of a positive account. Φαντασία, he there explains, is a motion that occurs as the result of actual sense-perceiving (428b13, b25-26), is similar to sense-perception (428b14), and is that in virtue of which its possessor can do and be affected by many things (428b16-17). Some scholars take this to be the definitive account;<sup>3</sup> others deny that it can be regarded

as the culmination of the inquiry.<sup>4</sup> The problem is that this account seems to treat φαντασία as if it were a derivative capacity responsible for residual sense-impressions. For such an account is in tension with many of the examples that Aristotle provides of this activity: examples that connect the faculty to the having of appearances.

But Aristotle's atypical treatment of φαντασία is no reflection of the importance he affords to it for explaining animal and human psychology. We can assume that φαντασία has some connection to error: a state Aristotle describes as "more characteristic of animals" and one that "the soul continues in longer" (427b1-2). The term φαντασία is used in connection with two kinds of sensory activities. It refers to sense-perceptions that are indistinct or inaccurate, as indicated by the locution "it appears to be *x*," and is used in connection with sensory activities that take place when the senses are inactive with respect to what appears. Φαντασίαι of this latter sort occur either when the senses are inhibited, as when we dream or hallucinate, or when they are active but not with respect to the objects appearing, as when we imagine, recollect, have after-images, or call to mind a φάντασμα in the service of thought. It is Aristotle's view that φαντάσματα are employed in all types of thinking. When we reflect practically, φαντάσματα serve as αἰσθήματα that help us determine what is good or bad and what ought to be pursued or avoided (*De Anima*. III 7, 431a14-16; 431b2-9). Similarly, when we reason discursively, we do so by reflecting on the information retained from our sense-experiences (*An.* III 8, 432a3-8). But even understanding involves φαντασία. "For," Aristotle says, "when we contemplate (θεωρῆ) we at the same time necessarily contemplate a φάντασμα" (*An.* III 8, 432a8-9).

Prof. Ward's interpretation of *De Anima* III 3 is commendable for its efforts to explain why Aristotle strays from his usual method of characterizing a faculty, how, if at all, a single faculty can accommodate such a wide variety of activities, and what role it plays in the possibility of error. Maintaining that "none of the recent scholars but one has found the correct perspective with which to assess the chapter" (18), Ward follows Caston's lead by asking how φαντασία can contribute to error. But her interpretation is novel insofar as she does not seek a unitary account that can explain its involvement in sundry activities. She argues that 'φαντασία' does not refer to the same faculty across uses and, therefore, Aristotle's inquiry cannot proceed as his others: namely, by investigation into its objects.

Ward's approach draws from her work on homonymy. Homonymous terms share a name in common but have different meanings. Some homonymous terms are accidentally so, in which case one cannot hope to find a relation between their uses. Related homonyms, by contrast, share some, though not all, common features. According to Ward, non-accidental homonyms can exhibit a range of relations including core-dependency, where the term "has a primary and a secondary use (or uses) with the primary that upon which the other uses depend" (7).

Upon establishing that 'φαντασία' does not refer to a single capacity, Ward seeks to determine its primary use. Taking φαντασία as necessary for the possibility of error, and error as requiring a "separation, or divergence, of the object causing a mental state from the content of that state" (19), Ward concludes that the primary use of the term signifies "the motion arising from sense-perception but distinct from it as bifurcation requires such that the possessor can act and be affected in many ways" (28). This

minimal description is meant to capture the thrust of Aristotle's positive treatment of φαντασία beginning at 428b10. The stipulation that all φαντασία involves bifurcation is meant to explain its role in error as well as our ability to reflect on or call to mind a sensible object in its absence. Without this latter capacity, we could not desire, move or think.

Ward's treatment of Aristotle's positive account evades the tension that results from the decaying-sense interpretation. But because she takes the last section of *De Anima* III 3 as describing only those features a φαντασία must have, imagining, dreaming, remembering, having after-images, hallucinating, and indistinct perceiving are, on her theory, "'secondary' cases of φαντασία," presupposing the primary account "in the sense that they all involve motions derived from sense-perception that are characterized by bifurcation" (28). Ward denies that bifurcation can be the feature that makes 'φαντασία' synonymous because the examples of its activity "exhibit bifurcation in different ways" (28). Ward does not explain how this is so; nonetheless, at the outset of her paper she argued against its synonymy, claiming that φαντασίαι are experientially different owing to the fact that each type of φαντασία has its own objects and a corresponding way of considering those objects. Take, for instance, her description of the following three types of φαντασίαι: appearances conflicting with beliefs, dreams and memories. She writes:

We may specify these three kinds of φαντασία -objects as follows: (i) a perceptual object, e.g., the size of the sun, being considered as not being actively perceived; (ii) a perceptual object, a dream, being considered as being actively perceived; (iii) a perceptual object, a memory-object, being considered as not

actively perceived, but as a likeness of something actively perceived in the past (15).

Her theory is that φαντασία is directed at perceptual experiences, φαντάσματα, and, therefore, there are as many uses of the term ‘φαντασία’ as there are different types of φαντάσματα.

Pace Ward, I suspect that φαντασία is just one of the faculties responsible for the ways things appear to us – that how things appear when we dream or think have to do with the complex of faculties working together. Thus I propose to look at the assumption that gives rise to her approach: namely, that φαντάσματα are the objects of φαντασία.

To be clear, Ward does not take φαντάσματα to be physical pictorial images that are viewed and contemplated. She appears to follow D. Modrak in taking φαντασία to be an awareness of the sensory content of a sensory experience.<sup>5</sup> But while Modrak distinguishes φαντασία from sense-perception in terms of the conditions under which the perceiver is subject – φαντασία, she explains, occurs when the conditions are not conducive to veridical perception as determined by normal percipients<sup>6</sup> – Ward distinguishes the two types of cognitions in terms of their psychological features. In her view, φαντασία involves a special directness towards an internal mental state, the φάντασμα. So where sense-perception has for its objects external sensible properties, a φαντασία has for its object an internal mental state, such as “indistinct present perceptions, dreams, after-images and memories, as well as the sensory elements of imagining, thinking, and planning” (14).

This is an improvement on Modrak’s thesis. In the interest of providing a unified account of sensory activity, Modrak treats sensible objects, αἰσθητά, as mental items first

and foremost.<sup>7</sup> She does recognize that Aristotle uses ‘αἰσθητά’ to refer to the sensible features of an external object, but argues that the “proper sensible exists potentially in the physical characteristics that bring about its perception.”<sup>8</sup> It is hard to understand how something that is potential can bring about a change in the sense-faculty. So if Aristotle sometimes describes the internal αἰσθητόν as actual, that is because sense-perceiving is the assimilation of the sense faculty to the external sensible; hence, prior to sense-perceiving, the sense-faculty must be potentially what the external object is actually (*An.* II 5, 418a3-6). Moreover, Modrak’s view awkwardly limits αἴσθησις to veridical cases of sense-perception, when Aristotle states quite clearly that αἴσθησις of both the incidental and common sensibles has the possibility for error (*An.* III 3, 428b19-25).<sup>9</sup>

Ward provides two arguments for her claim that φαντάσματα are the objects of φαντασία. The first occurs in her explanation of incidental perception, which she offers in order to show that φαντάσματα do not represent a single unified class. She writes:

In the case of indistinct perception and φαντασία, perception is going on, but since the object of perception is indistinct, we do not consider that object to be properly causing our sensory object (which is, say, an indeterminately shaped thing). Given that we take the actual, causal object to differ from the object of our sensory experience, we often indicate our reservations in linguistic behavior. (14-15)

What Ward calls “the object of perception” is the external object of sense-perception; “sensory object” refers to the φάντασμα. Ward reasons that because we would not blame sensible objects for our blurry vision – objects are not blurry – our reservation must regard the accuracy of our perceptual discernment, i.e., the φάντασμα. “We have,” she

writes in note xxiv, “reservation about the extent to which the φάντασμα is like the other thing, the perception or the perceptible object.” She thus assumes that having a reservation involves having a perceptual experience as an object.

Ward’s argument follows from the reasonable assumption that we do not typically assent to φαντασία, at least not when the senses are active. But this assumption presupposes that we do assent to ordinary sense-perceptions. Indeed, it is just because we affirm our sense-perceptions that we can “know” things in a certain perceptual way and, conversely, be in error. But if the withholding of an assent demonstrates that φαντασία is about the φάντασμα, then the assent to a sense-perception should likewise demonstrate that αἴσθησις is about the αἴσθημα. It will not do, however, for Ward to concede that αἴσθησις has for its object the αἴσθημα, since doing so would open her theory to the objections made against Modrak’s. But what this argument, I hope, shows is that the experience of having an indistinct perception does not crucially differ from that of an ordinary sense-perception – not enough to warrant a different structural account between the two faculties. If, then, αἴσθησις is of external objects, so too is φαντασία, at least when the senses are active.

Ward’s second argument occurs in her explanation of Aristotle’s “best-known” example of φαντασία: the example of the sun’s appearing to be a foot wide despite one’s belief that it is larger than the inhabited world (428b3-4). Ward argues that if we can say that something appears to us in a manner that conflicts with our beliefs about that object, that is because the object of φαντασία is different from the object of belief (δόξα). She concludes, then, that φαντασία cannot share the same object with sense-perception, since belief and sense-perception have the same object (428a27-28).



It is not hard to piece together how Ward arrived at this interpretation of the sun example, if we consider how the verbs ‘to appear’ and ‘to see’ are used. One cannot say, “I see a foot wide sun, but believe it to be bigger than the inhabited world.” Yet one can say, “The sun appears to be a foot across, though I believe it to be larger than the inhabited world.” Ward notes that the conflict regarding the claims, “I see a sun that is one foot wide” and “I believe the sun to be larger than the inhabited world,” is due to the fact that the object of sight is the same as the object of belief. She thereby concludes that if we can say that the sun appears to be a foot wide but believe otherwise, it is because our φαντασία and δόξα are about two different things. The appearance, to use her description, is “bifurcated” from the belief (22).

Ward makes much of Aristotle’s claim that δόξα and αἴσθησις are about the same thing (428a27-28). But what is at issue is not the objects of φαντασία, but whether it is some form of δόξα (428a18-19): whether it is δόξα with αἴσθησις, δόξα through αἴσθησις or a combination of the two (428a25-26). Δόξα, Aristotle explains, requires conviction (πίστις), which in turn requires λόγος (428a22-23). Arguably, then, the reason why one cannot say, “I see a foot wide sun, but believe it to be much larger” is because seeing involves believing. Indeed, when we are not sure of what we are seeing (i.e., when we are unsure of what the external αἰθητόν is), we withhold our δόξα and describe our sensory experience using the verb ‘to appear.’

If the sun example were designed to show that φαντασία has a different object from αἴσθησις, we would expect Aristotle to mention this in his explanation of it. What he says, rather, is this: If φαντασία involves δόξα, then, in the face of the sun’s appearance, we would either have to abandon our true δόξα (that the sun is larger than the inhabited

world), so long as nothing has changed or we have not forgotten our true beliefs, or admit that the same δόξα (our belief about the sun's appearance) is both true (because it appears to us to be a foot wide) and false (because we also believe that the sun is larger than the inhabited world) (428b4-9). Aristotle thereupon concludes that φαντασία is neither δόξα nor αἴσθησις nor a combination of the two (428b9). In fact, III 3 ends with the observation that brutes follow φαντασία because they do not have reason, and humans too, so long as our νοῦς is inhibited by passion, disease or sleep (429a4-8).

There might be confusion regarding the sun example because we do not always use 'appear' in cases where we withhold our beliefs. We can say, for instance, "I see the sun as a foot across" (Aristotle's example of φαντασία), just as easily as we can say, "I see the white object before me as the son of Diares" (Aristotle's example of incidental perception). Thus, the 'seeing-as' construction can be used to articulate incidental perceptions as well as φαντασία. But Aristotle is quite clear that φαντασία is not any type of αἴσθησις (428b9). Yet if φαντασία were δόξα with, or through, or in combination with αἴσθησις, it would be incidental perception. Hence, about this view he critically writes: "to imagine is to opine about whatever is perceived not incidentally" (428b1-2). That is to say, to imagine is to have beliefs about the proper sensibles. The sun example, I have argued, shows that φαντασία does not involve belief and so serves to distinguish incidental perception from φαντασία. And if this is Aristotle's intent, then neither is it the case that φαντασία and αἴσθησις differ in terms of their internal structures, as Ward suggests, nor is it that they differ in terms of the external conditions of the perceiver, as Modrak suggests. When the senses are active, sense-perception is distinguished from φαντασία in virtue of its relation or interplay with νοῦς.

So far my analysis has focused on φαντασίαι that occur when the senses are active or uninhibited. Indeed, the problem of Ward's thesis is highlighted in just these cases. Ward emphasizes that φαντάσματα are things that φαντασία has an awareness of: "where φαντασία is present," she writes, "what remains constant is that we are aware of one kind of sensory object that has its cause in another object" (24). So when Aristotle explains that indistinct perception is a case of φαντασία because "we say that this appears to us to be a human" (428a13-14), Ward takes the φάντασμα to be the referent of 'this.' "In such cases," she writes, "we are likely to adopt what Schofield terms a 'skeptical attitude' toward the object [i.e., φάντασμα] that is appearing to us" (15). Thus on Ward's analysis, what appears is not a human being, as Aristotle says, but a sensory experience that has for its content a human being. Furthermore, her interpretation is at odds with Aristotle's description of φαντασία as "that in virtue of which we say that a φάντασμα occurs to us" (428a1-2). Lines 428a1-2 indicate that a φάντασμα is an appearance that we experience, not an experience that we are aware of or cognize. The senses are already aware of both that and what we sense-perceive. Having an awareness of the content of our perceptual experience in addition to the awareness we already have of it is redundant.

The same criticism holds more generally in cases where the senses are inactive or incapacitated. Take dreaming, for instance. Ward does not want to say that φαντασία views dream images, because that would require positing pictorial images. But neither does she want to say that φαντασία makes us aware of the fact that we are dreaming, since we are unaware, more often than not, that we are dreaming. The only other possibility is that φαντασία makes us aware of our dream experiences that we would otherwise fail to notice, a notion that Gallop describes as incoherent.<sup>10</sup> Still, Ward might

think she has a parallel in *De anima* III 2, wherein Aristotle asserts that sense-perceiving involves the awareness that we are sense-perceiving. But for the parallel to hold, she would have to admit that in order to perceive, say, red, the eyes would have to become the sensible form of red – which is to say, they would have to perceive red – and also perceive that they are perceiving red. But this effectually makes perceptual awareness the same activity as perceiving. Aristotle insists that perceiving that we are seeing is not the same as seeing, since this capacity recognizes when we are not seeing (425b20-22; *Som.* 2,455a17-18). Hence, perceiving that we are seeing is a matter, not of perceiving what we are perceiving, but of perceiving that we are perceiving. In other words, it is a matter of perceiving that we are awake (*Som.* 455a12-b2). This capacity is presumably inhibited when we are asleep, explaining why we do not typically sense either way whether we are sleeping or not. But δόξα, we might add, can also be inhibited (429a7), in which case it will affirm the φάντασμα as if it is an αἴσθημα (*Insom.* 1, 459a6-8), and, I suppose, provide us with a particularly vivid dream.

Ward's intriguing approach stems from the difficulty philosophers have in tying together all the activities of φαντασία by means of a single faculty. Ultimately, I think her intuition is right – a single faculty cannot explain the many ways that φαντάσματα appear to us. But I suspect that if our φαντασίαι are experientially different from one another that is due as much to φαντασία as to the other faculties involved. This is not the place for a thoroughgoing argument, but it will prove instructive to consider the contrast Ward draws between φαντασία involved in thinking and incidental perception to motivate her approach. Ward argues that the two φαντασίαι cannot be the products of a single faculty, since there is no common feature that binds the experiences; whereas

incidental perception involves actual sense-experience, φαντασία in thought does not even involve the experience of some qualia. Let us put aside the difficulty of understanding how φαντασία, a faculty intimately related to the senses, can, on her view, fail to consider the perceptual features of the φάντασμα. What interests me is her analysis of φαντασία from the perspective of our experiences. Ward imagines that we can reflect on the experience of thinking to get at its imaginative and intellectual components. But this is what I think steers her off course. Thinking certainly has these two components, but because thinking is a unified experience, it does not work to parse out φαντασία's activity by reflecting on the cognitive experience of thinking. The experience of dreaming should help us see this. If dreams differ from one another and differ from other instances of φαντασία, such as the having of after-images or hallucinations, that has as much to do with φαντασία as with the other faculties that comprise our cognitive experiences. For arguably, the difference between the having of after-images, on the one hand, and dreaming, on the other, is the incapacitation of the senses in the latter case, and, for some, the incapacitation of the intellect as well.

University of Dayton

---

<sup>1</sup> Cf. *An.* II 4, 415a16-21.

<sup>2</sup> Cf. Caston 1996 and 1998; Wedin 1988, 45-63.

<sup>3</sup> Cf. Wedin 1988, 24-27; Caston 1996, 46-54.

<sup>4</sup> See for instance Nussbaum 1978, 251.

---

<sup>5</sup> Modrak 1986, 49-50 explains that when the senses are active, “sensory content” refers to the sensible properties that “the external object possesses in relation to the percipient”; when not, “a sensory content is an internal representation of sensible characters.”

<sup>6</sup> Ibid., 51-52. “Whether a particular sensory apprehension is described as an instance of αἴσθησις or of φαντασία depends upon features of the total situation in which the object is apprehended; these include the states of the percipient and states of the external environment. Aristotle makes the choice depend upon the accuracy with which the external object is apprehended, or more precisely, the likelihood of its being accurately perceived. For the most part, the unqualified use of αἴσθησις and its cognates in psychological descriptions is limited to cases of veridical perception... A cognition whose object is a sensory content is properly described as a perception just in case its object represents a state of affairs in the external world as determined by normal percipients”. See further her remarks on p. 67.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid., 54. “The object of perception is a complex of sensible characters that belong to an external object, as is the object of φαντασία in the case of non-veridical appearance. In other cases of φαντασία, such as dreaming or remembering, its object is a complex of sensible characters that represent an object not immediately present to the senses. Thus φαντασία has the same type of object as perception (428b12); its object like the object of perception is always a sensory content.”

<sup>8</sup> Ibid., 53.

<sup>9</sup> See note 6.

<sup>10</sup> Gallop 1996, 49 writes: “The notion of an ‘unconscious dream’, a dream of which the subject is totally unaware, would be as incoherent as that of, e.g. a pain the subject does not feel.”

## BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Caston, V. 1996. Why Aristotle Needs Imagination. *Phronesis* 41: 20-55.
- . 1998. Aristotle and the Problem of Intentionality. *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 58: 249-98.
- Gallop, D. 1996. *On Sleep and Dreams*. Peterborough.
- Modrak, D. 1986. *Phantasia* Reconsidered. *Archiv für Geschichte der Philosophie* 66:47-69.
- Nussbaum, M. 1978. *Aristotle's De Motu Animalium*. Princeton.
- Wedin, M. 1988. *Mind and Imagination in Aristotle*. New Haven.