

Interpreting Aristotle's *Phantasia* and Claiming its Role Within *Phronesis*

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Aristotelian *phronesis* and *phantasia* have not often been linked in interpretations of Aristotle's works. *Phronesis*, described mainly in the *Nicomachean Ethics* and *De Motu Animalium*, has been translated with many different terms, ranging from moral discernment to practical reasoning to prudence. It is generally considered to make up a part of Aristotle's ethical philosophy. *Phantasia* is sometimes connected with Aristotle's ethics, but it is addressed most carefully in relation to his physical theory of the soul and of movement, especially in *De Anima* and *De Motu Animalium*. The usual translation assigned to *phantasia* — imagination — places it importantly into the realm of ethical discussions of education today. In light of discussions of education from authors such as Buchmann and Greene, the role of imagination in teaching in general has been brought into the educational community's awareness.¹ Pendlebury, in particular, has brought out the role of imagination in the teacher's activity of *phronesis*.²

Following Pendlebury, who examined the concept of *phantasia* within her discussions of *phronesis*,³ this paper will look more closely at the role of *phantasia* in the concept of *phronesis*. The impetus for this approach comes from the criticisms of Aristotelian accounts of practical reasoning in teaching for their rigidity, for their lack of emotion and imagination.⁴ Critics point out that a reconstructed practical argument can not capture the complexities of thinking that make up teaching. This paper will examine the possibility that perhaps *phantasia* can be placed within the action of *phronesis* in order to provide a richer account of Aristotle's *phronesis*.

PHRONESIS

Phronesis is variously translated as moral discernment, practical wisdom, and prudence, among other phrases, but will be discussed here as practical reasoning, in order to indicate the active thinking processes that are occurring during *phronesis*. Aristotle defines *phronesis* in the *Nicomachean Ethics* as "a true and reasoned state or capacity to act with regard to the things that are good or bad for man."⁵ It is a description of practical reasoning that provides the framework within which a person can decide "What should I do in this situation?" *Phronesis* is an important part of Aristotle's ethical theory, as it involves the understanding of the "good" for humankind. In fact, Aristotle describes *phronesis* as an intellectual virtue, as a state which allows the individual who attains it to be able to ascertain what is good for humankind, and then to deliberate about how best to reach that good.⁶

Many writers on practical reasoning discuss the concept as if it were strictly a practical syllogism, with the syllogistic form. Writers have focused on this formal construct and have called it "practical syllogism" or "practical argument." The term "practical syllogism" itself, however, actually is not used by Aristotle.⁷ What is more plausible is the relation of the practical syllogism or argument to the concept of practical reasoning. In a series of articles structured by Fenstermacher and Richardson,⁸

the authors suggest that the practical argument is a formal reconstruction of a piece of practical reasoning, but does not replace the actual reasoning that occurs.

The most basic form of the “practical syllogism” was laid out by Aristotle in *De Motu Animalium* 6-8. The form of the argument consists of a major premise, a minor premise, and a conclusion, from those premises. The major premise, sometimes called the initiating premise, is a propositional expression of the individual’s desired end. This is a universal premise, stating a general good to be reached. It is generally considered to be a desire on the part of the individual agent. The next part of the practical syllogism takes into account the individual’s perception of his or her own particular situation. Included as the content of the minor premise will be one of a collection of possible alternatives available in the present situation. The minor premise is a belief of the individual about what is possible in this situation, based on perceptions of the situation. The conclusion of this syllogistic argument will be taken here to be a propositional statement about an action to be taken.

PHANTASIA

Phantasia is popularly translated as imagination. However, a number of Aristotelian scholars prefer to leave the word untranslated and to delineate the grammatical history of the term which would render it, rather, as closely related to appearances. This paper will use the term imagination when citing authors who do so, appearances when citing authors who do so, and leave the term untranslated as much as possible.

It is easy to see why it is so tempting to use the word imagination when speaking of Aristotle’s concept of *phantasia*. Aristotle defines *phantasia* most prominently at *De Anima* III.3, 428a1: “*phantasia* is that in virtue of which we say that a *phantasma* occurs to us.”⁹ Substituting the language of imagination and image, we speak of those who have imagination as people who have the capacity for creating or recognizing images. The term imagination, in an ironic twist, also excites our imagination. Unfortunately, however, this does not appear to be the meaning Aristotle assigned to *phantasia*. Rather, as commentators such as Nussbaum examine the concept of *phantasia*, they see in it something more accurately related to appearing.¹⁰ The root verb, *phantazo*, is translated to mean “to cause to appear.”¹¹ Thus, the terms *phantasia* and *phantasma* relate to the terms “appearances,” or “what appears.” This distinction between thinking of *phantasia* in terms of images or in terms of appearances leads to distinct views of what the term means in relation to *phronesis*.

In two different senses of the concept of *phantasia*, we can see the language of images. In these senses of the term, images are involved in thinking — either through the passive reception of after-images or through the active producing of images. Brentano’s discussion of *phantasia* exemplifies the passive reception of images. As Brentano writes, *phantasia* is specifically an image that lingers after a sensory experience, an after-effect, an after-image. As he describes, “imagination has its grounds in earlier sensations.”¹² Further, “whatever occurs in imagination was previously received in sensory perception.”¹³ It is in this sense that we see the image-related version of imagination that we commonly think of as images today, including

such images as hallucinations and dreams. In this sense of *phantasia*, we have a sensory encounter with an object or an experience, and then later through *phantasia*, we see a version of that original sensation. As Brentano describes it, “As an aftereffect of sensory perception, imagination is weaker than the former.”¹⁴

While this sense of *phantasia* is important, for discussions of practical reasoning it is important to determine whether we can think without having prior sensory experience of an object or idea. Lawson-Tancred points out that, starting from DA 428a1 and onward in III.3., Aristotle turns his attention to *phantasia* as “the production of mental imagery.”¹⁵ In this sense of the term, *phantasia* is the active producing of visual images or appearances. As Schofield writes, “The illustration of *phantasia* Aristotle gives is of someone producing things before his eyes” (DA 427b18-19).¹⁶ Now the question is, how does the role of actively producing images related to practical reasoning, to *phronesis*? Can we identify images for their importance for current decision-making? To answer that question, one more sense of the concept of *phantasia* must be described.

Nussbaum lays out the final sense of the term *phantasia*, which puts the focus back on appearances rather than on images and imagination. Nussbaum describes Aristotle as more concerned not with the image itself, but rather with how things “appear” to people.¹⁷ She focuses the attention in the definition Aristotle gives of *phantasia*: “that in virtue of which we say that a *phantasma* occurs to us,” on the phrase “occurs to us.” *Phantasia* is the capability that we have not only to perceive an appearance, but to say that we see it *as* an appearance of a particular type. Nussbaum extends the definition: “*phantasia* is the faculty in virtue of which the animal sees his object as an object of a certain sort.”¹⁸ Thus *phantasia* goes beyond just the perception of an image, to the interpretive power of the individual to see that object *as* something. Indeed, Aristotle lists *phantasia* as one of the items that fall under the category of *kritika*, of being involved in drawing distinctions. So here we come to the first sense of *phantasia* described by Aristotle in the beginning of DA III.3, before 428a1, as “an interpretive mental act in connection with perception.”¹⁹ Thus, this final sense of the term *phantasia* relates to the interpretive power to interpret perceptions, to make judgments or distinctions, or, as Hankinson adds, involving comparison.²⁰

LINKING *PHANTASIA* WITHIN *PHRONESIS*

A look at *phronesis* can tie all of these descriptions of *phantasia* together in a productive way dealing with action events. Of key importance to the discussion here of how *phantasia* fits within the concept of *phronesis* are two points regarding *phronesis*. First, the selection of the end goal is proposed here to clearly involve *phantasia*. Second, the premises of practical reasoning deal with particulars, which is another key role for *phantasia*.

Selection of the End “Good.” In talking about the selection of the end “good”, Engberg-Pederson calls this idea the “grasp of the end.” The author states that *phronesis* involves “(i) the ability to deliberate and (ii) the simple possession in explicit form of the grasp of the end that is presupposed by deliberation.”²¹ Cooper draws out a different interpretation,²² by pointing to Aristotle’s emphasis on

repeated training as a way to lead a person to be moral or to act justly. The outcome of this training, according to Aristotle, is that a person develops a disposition to act a certain way.

Several authors discuss the role that *phantasia* plays in helping to produce the image of the end goal, as well as to provide the possibilities for the person who is deciding to act. Frede discusses how important *phantasia* is in determining the goal in a situation:

All activities...presuppose that I envisage something as good or bad for me, to be pursued or avoided. The necessary condition of my thinking that something is good or bad, according to Aristotle, is that the soul shall have certain *phantasmata* (DA 431a14-17): I have to have the image of a future good or bad (DA 433b12-28).²³

Frede continues, the intellect, the thinking, “has to envisage concrete situations containing material objects to decide that something is worthwhile or should be avoided...In order to make a decision I have to create for myself the appearance of a future good, a worthwhile aim” (cf. 433a14).²⁴ Of course, since one cannot physically and sensorily experience the future, one can not have an image of the future in the after-image sense described above. In the case of envisaging the future, Frede writes, “There can, of course, be no sense-perceptions of future goods and evils. All sensible projections are due to imagination.”²⁵

This discussion from Frede shows the importance of both senses of the concept of *phantasia*: both the producing of images and the interpreting and comparing of possibilities. The interpretive sense of *phantasia* is especially important at this point, where we have multiple possibilities for the future and we must decide which is the good end to pursue. Thus *phantasia* comes into play in the *kritika* sense, in making distinctions between these various ends. As Frede writes, “Aristotle actually mentions a kind of ‘merger’ of different *phantasiai* into one image that allows us to compare the relative goodness (or badness) of several possible ends (DA 434a9).”²⁶

And finally, Pendlebury adds, referring to Nussbaum’s view, writes that

both emotion and imagination play an essential part of the proper grasp of situations...In the Aristotelian sense, the job of imagination (*phantasia*) is to focus on reality, past and present, in all its concrete particulars rather than to create unreality through free-floating fantasy. It is through imagination that we discern an item in the world *as* something to be sought or shunned (or to be sought and shunned, for different reasons), *as* something that answers one or more of our practical concerns or interests.²⁷

Perception of Particulars. Following Aristotle, who writes that “practical wisdom is concerned with the ultimate particular which is perception” (NE1142a25-27),²⁸ Wiggins and Pendlebury have discussed the importance of ‘situational appreciation.’²⁹ As discussed earlier, the individual who is practically wise, who displays *phronesis*, both determines the end goal or end ‘good,’ and then looks at his or her own individual situation and determines what type of case, within the framework of the universal good already placed in the mind, is appropriate in the individual situation. This further step of practical reasoning has to do with “the possible.” The individual must be able to deliberate through these facets to determine what actions are possible to take on the way to reaching the end of the human good selected. Situations requiring action are often full of “possible’s,” and

the person of practical wisdom, one who can reason well practically, is one who can take perceptions about these possible's and decide which actions would lead to previously known universal goods for man.

Pendlebury describes the way that *phantasia* becomes important to this form of thinking, to situational appreciation:

the relevant features of the situation may not all jump to the eye. To see what they are, to prompt the imagination to play upon the question and let it activate in reflection and thought-experiment whatever concerns and passions it should activate, may require a high order of situational appreciation, or, as Aristotle would say, perception (*aisthesis*).³⁰

Wiggins, writing from the perspective of *phronesis*, also lays out the necessity of deciding between different ends through examining the particulars of each concrete situation. However, Wiggins writes that when there are multiple possibilities within an individual's practical reasoning, "there are no formal criteria by which to compare the claims of competing syllogisms."³¹ *Phantasia* comes into play in two ways here. One, *phantasia* in the *kritika* sense provides the comparative framework for allowing such a comparative judgment of "competing syllogisms." Two, *phantasia* in the image-producing sense provides the means for individuals to produce in their thinking and reasoning the end good. This is where *phantasia* becomes a part of the practical syllogistic form. Since desire for a good end is the initiating point of action, desire is involved in every action. Where does *phantasia* come in? As Nussbaum writes, *phantasia* and perception "seem to do two jobs in connection with action: they present to the animal some object of desire and they present the concrete situation as an example of what is or is not desired."³² In addition in *phronesis*, the desire is proposed as a way to move the person to think and act. Nussbaum continues: "*Phantasia*, then, is involved in every action; it must 'prepare' the desire...It looks as though its job is to present the perceived or thought object to the creature in such a way that it can be moved to act" (MA 702a18ff., DA 432b15, 433b26-30).³³

PHANTASIA AND PHRONESIS IN TEACHING

Let us look at an example of how *phantasia* plays an important role within the *phronesis* of teachers. Take the example of an elementary school teacher who uses the whole-language approach to reading. As the teacher reflects upon her teaching through the structure of *phronesis*, she may discover that she has several beliefs, goals, and desires for her students. For instance, the teacher may desire to foster a classroom environment which will allow students to feel comfortable sharing their ideas with the rest of the class. She may believe that this approach will lead to better and more enthusiastic readers. And her final goal for the students is to put together a book of their own writing. Her deliberation leads her to make the decision to use the whole-language approach in her classroom.

How did she ascertain that these would be good ideas and goals for her students? This is where *phantasia*, or imagination, comes into play. In the "after-image" interpretation of *phantasia*, the interpretation here would be that the teacher experienced this approach as a student and felt that it was helpful in learning to read. In the "productive" sense of *phantasia*, we would see the teacher's choice as actively producing an image of which approach to use. Perhaps she learned to read through

a phonics approach, which encouraged her to imagine an alternate approach that would be a better and more enjoyable approach to learning to read. And finally, *phantasia* as *kritika*, as an interpretive intellectual characteristic, allows the teacher to analyze these and other competing approaches to the teaching of reading. The teacher, through *phantasia*, can incorporate the images gained through different experiences as a student and as a teacher into the practical reasoning process. The deliberation on these images becomes a part of the practical reasoning process as a set of beliefs and desires.

Imagination within practical reasoning can also help to help decide, within the *kritika* framework, on what to do when there are competing goals in the teaching situation. For instance, the district's curriculum may impose the goal on the teacher of completing a specific reading basal by Christmas, accompanied by a phonics workbook. Are the teacher's beliefs about education strong enough to lead her to decide to act against the goals given by her school administrators? Does she believe that responsibility to district goals will be more helpful to her own future teaching goals than would be following her own desires? Has she made specific decisions that allow the completion of both goals in his class? Why has she decided on one day to use a strictly pencil and paper, worksheet lesson based on the basal reader while on the next day he uses a multi-media learning experience involving students speaking into audio cassettes, developing an art project, and doing oral presentations? This is where *phantasia* comes into the *phronesis* process to help the teacher in making classroom decisions.

SUMMARY

In summary, we can see the two senses of *phantasia* being quite importantly involved in the process of *phronesis*. To begin the practical reasoning process, the image-production sense of *phantasia* comes into play, during which an individual lays out "an ideal" as the end goal of reasoning. And then in the *kritika*, interpretive sense, the individual compares the options and makes a judgment about the best action to take. Thus, *phantasia* "prepares the desire" at the beginning of an action deliberation, and it is involved at each step of practical reasoning as it helps to compare and make judgments about the different possible steps to take on the way to that end.

In answer to the critics of the practical reasoning approach to teaching, the teaching situation definitely is a complex matter involving both individual and socially constructed moral issues of the classroom. However, as shown in this paper, Aristotle's account of *phronesis* need not be seen as rigid and restrictive of a teacher's thoughts. Rather, with the incorporation of the different senses of *phantasia* into the concept of *phronesis*, practical reasoning can be seen as a rich concept that allows for interpretation and imagination in the classroom.

1. Margret Buchmann, "Argument and Contemplation in Teaching," *Oxford Review of Education* 14 (1988): 201-14; Margret Buchmann, "The Careful Vision: How Practical is Contemplation in Teaching?" *American Journal of Education* (1989): 35-61; Maxine Greene, *The Dialectic of Freedom* (New York: Teachers College Press, 1988).

2. Shirley Pendlebury, "Practical Arguments and Situational Appreciation in Teaching," *Educational Theory* 40 (1990): 171-79 and Shirley Pendlebury, "Practical Arguments, Rationalization and Imagination in Teachers' Practical Reasoning: A Critical Discussion," *Journal of Curriculum Studies* 25 (1993): 145-51.
3. Pendlebury, "Practical Arguments, Rationalization, and Imagination," 147.
4. A series of interchanges which include discussions on this point can be found in *Educational Theory*, in particular those in this issue by Margret Buchmann, Jere Confrey, Brent Kolbourn, and Thomas Russell. Margret Buchmann, especially, has written about the "impracticality" of the practical syllogism for discussing teachers' activities. Authors who have written about practical reasoning in research on teaching include Gary D. Fenstermacher, "Philosophy of Research on Teaching: Three Aspects," in *Handbook of Research on Teaching*, 3d. ed., ed. Merlin C. Wittrock (New York: Macmillan, 1986), 37-49. Gary D. Fenstermacher, "Prologue to My Critics," *Educational Theory* 37 (1987): 357-60; Jana Noel, "Aristotle's Account of Practical Reasoning as a Theoretical Base for Research on Teaching," in *Philosophy of Education 1990*, ed. David P. Ericson (Normal, Ill.: The Philosophy of Education Society, 1991), 270-80. Pendlebury, *Educational Theory*, Pendlebury, "Practical Arguments, Rationalization and Imagination"; Thomas F. Green, "Teacher Competence as Practical Rationality," *Educational Theory* 26 (1976): 249-58. Robert Orton, "Practical Reasoning and Effective Teaching," paper presented at the annual meeting of the American Educational Research Association, April 1992.
5. Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, trans. David Ross (New York: Oxford University Press, 1984), III.3., 1112b11.
6. Noel, "Aristotle's Account of Practical Reasoning," 1991.
7. Alisdair MacIntyre, *Whose Justice? Which Rationality?* (Notre Dame, Ind.: University of Notre Dame Press, 1988); W.F.R. Hardie, *Aristotle's Ethical Theory*, 2d. ed. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1980).
8. A series of articles appeared in the *Journal of Curriculum Studies* 25 on practical arguments in teaching. Authors included Gary D. Fenstermacher and Virginia Richardson pp. 101-14; Barbara Morgan, pp. 115-24; Dorothy Vasquez-Levy, pp. 125-43; and Shirley Pendlebury, pp. 145-51.
9. Aristotle, *De Anima*, trans. Hugh Lawson-Tancred (New York: Penguin Books, 1986).
10. Martha Nussbaum, *Aristotle's de Motu Animalium* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1978).
11. Malcolm Schofield, "Aristotle on the Imagination," in *Articles on Aristotle*, vol. 4, ed. Jonathan Barnes et al. (London: Duckworth, 1979): 103-32.
12. Brentano, *The Psychology of Aristotle*, trans. by Rolf George (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1977), 68.
13. *Ibid.*, 68.
14. *Ibid.*, 69.
15. Aristotle, *De Anima*, 85.
16. Schofield, "Aristotle on the Imagination," 273.
17. Nussbaum, *Aristotle's de Motu Animalium*.
18. *Ibid.*, 255.
19. Aristotle, *De Anima*, 84.
20. R.J. Hankinson, "Perception and Evaluation: Aristotle on the Moral Imagination," *Dialogue* 29 (1990): 41-63.
21. T. Engberg-Pedersen, *Aristotle's Theory of Moral Insight* (New York: Clarendon Press, 1983): 224.
22. John Cooper, *Reason and Human Good in Aristotle* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1975).
23. Dorothea Frede, "The Cognitive Role of *Phantasia* in Aristotle," in *Essays on Aristotle's De Anima*, ed. Martha C. Nussbaum and Amelie Oksenberg Rorty (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1992), 288-89.
24. *Ibid.*, 289.
25. *Ibid.*
26. *Ibid.*, 291.

27. Pendlebury, "Practical Arguments, Rationalization and Imagination," 147.
28. Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*.
29. David Wiggins, "Deliberation and Practical Reason," in *Essays on Aristotle's Ethics*, ed. Amelie Rorty (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1980): 221-40; Pendlebury, "Practical Arguments and Situational Appreciation"; and Pendlebury, "Practical Arguments, Rationalization and Imagination."
30. Pendlebury, "Practical Arguments and Situational Appreciation," 176.
31. Wiggins, "Deliberation and Practical Reason," 234.
32. Nussbaum, *Aristotle's de Motu Animalium*, 232.
33. *Ibid*, 233.