

AN ASPECT OF ARISTOTLE'S AFTERLIFE

FINK (J.L.) (ed.) *Phantasia in Aristotle's Ethics. Reception in the Arabic, Greek, Hebrew and Latin Traditions*. Pp. vi + 175. London and New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2019. Cased, £85, US\$114. ISBN: 978-1-350-02800-5.

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The concept of this volume will present readers with certain difficulties. Contrary to what the title suggests, Aristotle's notion of *phantasia* and its reception in a variety of premodern philosophical traditions is not the book's primary focus. Rather, the studies assembled here explore the fate of a single sentence from the *Nicomachean Ethics* (*NE*). They emerged from a seminar held in 2015 at the University of Gothenburg under the auspices of the project *Representation and Reality in the Aristotelian Tradition* (2013–2020) and, hence, retain an explorative character. This accounts for the many negative results and caveats one encounters, for example, already on p. 1, where Fink and J. Moss write: 'Due to the hazards of transmission, there is simply not enough material devoted to the sentence in the ancient Greek, Arabic and Hebrew traditions'. For this reason, all contributions oscillate between the initial question and a broader treatment of the reception of Aristotle's notion of *phantasia*. The volume certainly offers interesting insights, but perhaps not always on levels that are explicitly addressed.

What is this sentence from *NE* all about? In *NE* 6.5 Aristotle reflects on the way in which practical wisdom (*phronēsis*) is involved in attaining happiness. He arrives at a definition following which *phronēsis* is a function of rationality concerned with moral agency (*NE* 6.5, 1140b5). According to this definition, *phronēsis* is related to truth in that the practically wise person is supposed to have unthwarted epistemic access (*alēthēs hupolēpsis*) to moral principles that form the basis of judgements about moral agency. The sentence at the heart of this volume (*NE* 6.5, 1140b17–18) is directly related to this point and reads as follows: 'But the principle does not immediately appear to the person who has been corrupted by pleasure and pain' (tr. Fink, p. 2). The philosophical stumbling block is the part about appearing (*phainetai*). The contributions approach this from two angles: first, by asking more generally about the role Aristotle assigns to *phantasia* in moral deliberation, and, second, by inquiring into how this topic and the passage in question were understood by later commentators. As for the second line of inquiry, the commentary literature considered spans four linguistic traditions (Arabic, Greek, Hebrew, Latin) and over a millennium. It is taken up in Chapters 2–6. Chapters 1 and 7 (Fink) provide a conceptual framework and engage with some of the topic's more systematic aspects.

In Chapter 1 Fink and Moss introduce the sentence from *NE* 6.5 and open up a horizon of questions for the following contributions. Some of these are fundamental, like the question whether the verb *phainesthai* is used in a technical sense and, if so, whether it should be linked to Aristotle's psychology of *phantasia*. This leads to more specific questions, especially about the share that intellectual and non-intellectual powers of the soul have in grasping moral principles. Apart from an overview of the contributions, the chapter sketches the volume's main results. It describes the reception of *NE* as 'complicated and vulnerable' (p. 10). If 'vulnerable' refers to the conceptual changes and semantic shifts documented in the following chapters, it is an odd descriptor.

The authors also outline an avenue of research that is prompted by the results, namely an exploration of the relationship between Aristotle's moral psychology and his natural

philosophy. This is partly taken up in Chapter 7. This chapter generally seeks to analyse the psychological foundation of Aristotle's notion of *phronēsis* and argues that the operative notion in *NE* 6.5, 1140b17–18 is 'deliberative *phantasia*' (*phantasia bouleutikē*, cf. *De anima* 3.10–11). This sort of *phantasia* produces a representation of the goal of moral action. Accordingly, it is this sort of *phantasia*, or so Fink argues, that must be impaired when the appearance of a principle of action is corrupted by pleasure or pain. Following the author, the appearance itself has a sense-perceptual quality. The practically wise person (*ho phronimos*) perceives pleasure in connection with what is good, whereas the corrupted agent similarly perceives its opposite (or what appears good to them). Fink discusses this under the heading 'moral blindness', suggesting that the corrupted agent exhibits some sort of perceptive incapability. He draws a parallel with Aristotle's comparisons of moral inferiority with illness (p. 141, cf. *NE* 7.8, 1150b32–5). This inherently ableist vocabulary, which occurs throughout the volume, should at least have been problematised.

In Chapter 2 F.A.J. de Haas leads off the presentation of the 'hazards of transmission' with two early Greek commentators, namely Aspasius (second century CE) and Alexander of Aphrodisias (second/third century CE). Alexander deals with the passage in a handful of texts, and Aspasius engages with some parallel passages that de Haas introduces at the beginning. In both authors the discussion of moral judgement has the Stoics in mind as interlocutors. In Aspasius this becomes clear when he introduces the notion 'in accord with nature' (*kata phusin*) in order to explain why different things appear good to people with differently developed moral character. Alexander, in turn, argues against a determination of moral character by appealing to the notion of potentiality (*dunamis*). Virtue (*aretē*) is not a natural given, but the potentiality to acquire virtue is. This means that agents always retain the power to correct their habits and, hence, their moral character. This consequently leaves room for calibrating the appearance of moral principles. Both Aspasius and Alexander update Aristotle to the controversies of their own times and use commentaries as 'vehicles' of their philosophy.

This format was to remain a literary space not only of interpretation, but of innovation in the next thousand years as the authors discussed in the following contributions evince. Yet, other literary engagements with Aristotle arise as well, most notably translations. In Chapter 3 F. Woerther is concerned with Ibn Rushd's (or Averroes's, d. 1198 CE) *Middle Commentary* on *NE*, which was composed in Arabic, but survived in its entirety only in Latin and Hebrew translations. Woerther starts with a short survey of the Arabic translation and transmission of *NE*. Further, she presents Ibn Rushd's and his predecessors' conceptions of *phantasia* (*takhayyul* or *fantāsiyā*) and specifies the character of Ibn Rushd's commentary work. The subsequent sections deal with the volume's central passage and inquire into the commentator's interference with the text or the way in which he uses it as a starting point for formulating his own views. However, Woerther has to concede that Ibn Rushd's commentary is unhelpful when it comes to the question of how *phantasia* relates to moral principles.

M. Trizio's Chapter 4 begins by placing *NE* in the Byzantine school curriculum. The Byzantine engagements with the *NE* probably mostly served private needs and are often simplifying. Trizio introduces the four most important Byzantine commentaries, which were composed from the eleventh to the fifteenth centuries and are partly unedited. Of these works only one is significant with respect to the book's central theme, namely the commentary by Eustratius of Nicaea (d. 1120). Eustratius relates *phantasia* not to perception, but to *phronēsis*, i.e. he is concerned with an intellectual or rational form of perception and its being impaired by the passions. He understands the passage in terms of the conflict between the rational and the non-rational parts of the soul. Trizio highlights the importance

of the original Platonic image of the ‘eye of the soul’ (*omma/opthalmos tēs psuchēs*) for Eustratius, which serves as a sort of leading metaphor. It is underscored by Eustratius’ conception of the object of *phronēsis*, i.e. a particular or individual action.

I. Costa’s Chapter 5 deals with the Latin tradition and is probably the volume’s best equipped to answer its initial question, since there exist a number of important and still complete Latin commentaries on *NE*. Of these, the chapter deals with the commentaries of Albertus Magnus (d. 1280), Thomas Aquinas (d. 1274) and Radulphus Brito (d. 1320). First, however, Costa illuminates what he aptly terms the ‘goal’s destruction (or disappearance) passage’ by means of Aristotle’s concept of *phronēsis*. He concludes that the passage cannot solely be about epistemic access (see above), but must describe an incapacity on the side of practical reason. The next sections treat the reception of the passage in the three thinkers. Costa shows how it is incorporated in a Christian theological setting. While Albert and Radulphus explain destruction in terms of incontinence, Aquinas relates it to capital sin, especially lust (*luxuria*). For Radulphus, the matter is also connected to free will, which is responsible for incontinence.

In Chapter 6 C.M. Neria looks at how Jewish thinkers drew on *NE* and managed to incorporate Aristotelian into Jewish ethics. The chapter focuses on Hebrew translations and commentaries of *NE*. Neria remarks on the social history of these texts, pointing out that the translation that Meir Alguadez (fl. c. 1400), produced on the basis of Robert Grosseteste’s text, ‘by the end of the fifteenth century ... had become the most quoted philosophical source in Jewish homiletical literature’ (p. 105, cf. also pp. 112–13). The chapter then more closely examines four of the works: Samuel ben Judah’s (fourteenth century) translation of Ibn Rushd’s *Middle Commentary*; Alguadez’s Hebrew translation; Joseph ben Shem Tov’s commentary; and a homiletical work by Isaac ben Moses ‘Arama (d. 1494). Neria critically engages with an interesting observation made by L.V. Berman who argued that the Hebrew translation *yir’at het* (‘fear of sin’) for *sōphrosunē* is not an instance of religious vocabulary entering philosophical discourse, but rather a sign of a secularisation of biblical terms. According to Neria, when reading Joseph ben Shem Tov’s translation, this suggestion does not hold water. The inquiry into how Jewish authors dealt with the ‘mechanism’ of destruction shows that the distorting factors are made very explicit (*hana’ah*, ‘intense pleasure’, and *etzev*, ‘grief’). This could then serve the purposes of moral education as exhibited in ‘Arama’s homilies. Finally, Neria returns to *phantasia* and highlights an interesting topic that concerned Jewish thinkers with respect to the ethical dimension of imagination, namely prophecy.

If we now take a step back and look at what is discussed in the book overall, we find that, on the one hand, it presents studies of the history of a set of interrelated concepts that play a fundamental role in Aristotle’s ethics. Conceptual and semantic changes are traced over different linguistic, cultural and literary contexts. Against this background, the volume’s unusually narrow focus can be justified. On the other hand, the changes in question are made possible by various textual practices – commenting, summarising, translating, paraphrasing, abbreviating. These practices are not studied in themselves here. It would have been instructive if the relation between these two aspects, which come up in nearly all contributions, would have been thought of more closely together. The volume still gives illustrative answers to the question lurking in the background of how the history of concepts and textual practices are mutually dependent.

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