

## ARISTOTLE ON THE APPARENT GOOD

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### ABSTRACT

The desired and the wished for is either the good or the apparent good (*phainomenon agathon*). And this is why the pleasant is desired, for it is an apparent good; for some believe it is, and to some it appears [so] although they do not believe it so. For *phantasia* and belief do not reside in the same part of the soul.

(*EE* VII.2 1235b26-29)

The cause of [perceptual illusions] is that the faculty in virtue of which the ruling part judges is not identical with that in virtue of which appearances (*phantasmata*) come before the mind. A proof of this is that the sun appears only a foot in diameter, though often something else contradicts the *phantasia*.

(*Insomn.* 460b16-20)

These two passages, one drawn from Aristotle's ethical works, another from his psychological works, present parallel accounts of two apparently disparate phenomena: motivational conflict on the one hand, and the experience of optical illusion on the other. Aristotle implies that both involve a clash between how one rationally judges things to be and how things appear. In the optical case, the relevant appearances are visual appearances, ways things look. In the ethical case, they are what we might call evaluative appearances: appearances of things as good or bad.

Talk of things appearing good is pervasive in a philosophical tradition which stretches from Plato to the present, a tradition which holds that we desire things insofar as they appear good to us. Aristotle very much belongs to this tradition, and talk of the apparent good is particularly prominent in his works. In his psychological works the apparent good surfaces as the goal of all actions driven by appetite, human and animal. In his ethical works it plays a major role in the explanations both of human motivation and of moral error: we all strive for what appears good to us, but only to the virtuous person does what is truly good appear so. In fact, I shall argue, the apparent good is a notion absolutely central to Aristotle's accounts of desire, pleasure, emotion, deliberation, and virtue – in short, to some of the most important and most debated areas of his psychology, philosophy of action, and ethics.

But what is it for something to appear good? What is the relation between such appearances and ordinary perceptual appearances? Why does pleasure in particular appear good, as Aristotle claims in the first passage above (and as many would agree)? And how does what appears good motivate desire and action?

For some philosophers talk of the apparent good is loose or metaphorical: that something appears good to someone means just that she believes it good, or perhaps that its appeal is particularly vivid to her. For others appearing good may be a primitive notion. I want to show that Aristotle's case is different: his texts provide the resources for a substantive theory of apparent goodness. The parallels between the two passages quoted above suggest – and other passages confirm – that we should take the 'apparent' in 'apparent good' quite literally. They imply that Aristotle holds that things appear good to us, just as things appear large or small, in virtue of a psychological capacity responsible for quasi-perceptual phenomena like dreams, visualization, after-images and optical illusions: *phantasia* (conventionally but misleadingly

translated ‘imagination’). And things falsely appear good to us when *phantasia* misrepresents the world, just as in cases of perceptual illusion.

If this is right, then we can reach a better understanding of Aristotle’s notion of apparent goodness by applying the account Aristotle gives of *phantasia* and its role in motivation – an account we find in the psychological works – to the notion of the apparent good as it figures in his ethical theory. The project of this book is to do just that. I will argue that while no account of the apparent good is explicit in the ethical works, these works assume an account that we can derive from the psychological works. An appearance of goodness is a motivating representation to *phantasia*, which derives from previous perception of its object as pleasant, and forms in turn the basis for thoughts about goodness.

This may seem a stretch: surely, some will protest, Aristotle’s talk of *phantasia* in the first passage above is metaphorical, or at least broad; he does not intend the word in the technical sense developed in the *de Anima* and other psychological works, nor does he intend his various mentions of things appearing good in the ethical works to have any special connection with quasi-perceptual appearance. Aristotle, just like us, often talks of how things appear as a way of talking about how people believe things to be, perhaps implying that the beliefs in question are pre-reflective or in need of examination: consider, for example, the famous *phainomena* of *EN VII.1*, appearances which are surely intellectual rather than perceptual.

This is true; nonetheless, there is a general reason to suspect that his talk of the apparent good is specially connected with *phantasia*. Looking at the notion of the apparent good across the corpus, we will see that Aristotle uses it in two ways: to explain motivation in general, and more narrowly to explain mistaken motivation. Meanwhile, a close look at *phantasia* in the psychological works will reveal that it plays two main explanatory roles that correspond closely to these. Through *phantasia*, we can represent objects of perception or of thought to ourselves when those objects are not present: that is, through *phantasia* objects of perception or thought appear to us in their absence. Such appearances are necessary for motivation (as well as for thought): through them we can represent something not yet present to perception and thereby come to have it as a goal. But they can also play a potentially harmful role, when through *phantasia* we misrepresent the objects of perception. This is what occurs when we experience perceptual illusions; it is also, I shall argue, what happens in ethical error – what happens when we act or feel as we should not.

Thus we have reason to take seriously the connections between *phantasia* and the apparent good. When we do, I want to show, we gain new insight into some of the most important areas of Aristotle’s practical philosophy: the roles of desire and cognition in action, the nature of the passions, the role of intellect in *akrasia*, the relation between character and intellect, the mechanism of ethical habituation, and the scope of practical reasoning. Most generally, we get a new and controversial interpretation of Aristotle’s moral psychology, one on which he holds a view I will call Practical Empiricism.

It is well known that Aristotle holds that the content of all theoretical thought is ultimately derived from perception: as the medieval philosophers paraphrased his view, “There is nothing in the mind that was not previously in the senses.” My analysis of the apparent good will show that he holds a similar view of practical thought: thought about what one should do, what is good. Just as ordinary perception is at the basis of all theoretical cognition, so practical perception – which I will analyze as pleasurable or painful perception of things as good or bad – is at the basis of all practical cognition. Pleasurable perceptions give rise through the work of

*phantasia* to appearances of goodness, which in turn form the basis for our thoughts about goodness – and thereby for even our most rational desires.

This interpretation of Aristotle as a practical empiricist will be controversial in two important, and related, ways. First, it gives an absolutely central role to pleasure in human motivation, and thereby in human virtue. Second, it greatly restricts the role of rational, intellectual thought in Aristotle's ethics, for it entails that *phantasia* – a non-rational form of cognition, i.e. one that we share with lower animals, and that belongs to a non-rational part of the human soul – plays roles that others have claimed can only be played by intellect.

The plan of the book is as follows.

Part I explicates the notion of evaluative appearance implicit in the psychological works. Chapter 1 argues that the *de Anima* and *de Motu Animalium*'s discussions of locomotion show that there is a special form of cognition crucial to all action: evaluative cognition. Chapter 2 offers an account of the most basic form of such cognition, evaluative perception, arguing that Aristotle construes pleasurable and painful perception as genuine cognition of value. Chapter 3 turns to *phantasia*, a very vexed topic: although Aristotle claims that *phantasia* plays a necessary role in all action (and all thought), interpreters disagree over its nature, its scope, and even over whether Aristotle provides a unified account of it at all. I argue that he does, and defend an account of *phantasia* which differs from recent ones in its minimalism: *phantasia* can do everything Aristotle attributes to it while being simply what he evidently defines it as, a faculty of preserving and reproducing perceptual experiences. I then use this account to show that *phantasia*'s crucial role in action involves preserving and reproducing the pleasurable or painful, motivating aspects of perceptions of value. This yields an account of the apparent good as a pleasurable, motivating appearance to *phantasia*.

The rest of the book shows how this notion of evaluative *phantasia* is at work in Aristotle's views about human motivation and human virtue. The aim is not only to show continuity between the ethical and psychological works, but also to use the philosophy of action derived from the psychological works in Part I to illuminate important debates and puzzles about Aristotle's ethical views.

Part II examines non-rational human motivation. Chapter 4 takes on a long-standing debate about Aristotle's account of the passions, the non-rational emotions and desires central to ethical character. Using the analysis of the apparent good developed in chapter 3, I argue that when Aristotle describes fear, shame, pity and other emotions as involving appearances of things as good or bad, he means this to be taken literally: passions are based on evaluative *phantasia*. Chapter 5 focuses on appetites, and in particular on Aristotle's account of *akrasia*, weakness of will. Here I use chapter 3's analysis of the apparent good to show that the *de Anima* contains an overlooked account of *akrasia*; I then argue that recognizing this account helps us to solve the interpretative problems that have plagued the more famous account in the ethical works.

Part III argues that evaluative *phantasia* plays a crucial role even in our distinctively rational, distinctively human motivations: decision (*προαίρεσις*) about what promotes our ends, and wish (*βουλήσις*) for our ends themselves. Chapter 6 shows that practical reasoning (deliberation) relies on evaluative *phantasia*. Chapter 7 shows that when Aristotle says that we wish for what appears good to us, he means this in the technical sense: wishes are for ends, and each person's view of the end is a function of her non-rational character; therefore it is *phantasia* rather than intellect which provides us with our goals. Chapter 8 explains this by developing the Practical Empiricism thesis. Ethical habituation shapes character, as Aristotle argues, because it

involves repeated pleasurable perception of virtuous activity, which gives rise via *phantasia* to a general appearance of virtuous activity as good. Intellect conceptualizes this general appearance, but the content comes from non-rational cognition. Thus even our most distinctively human and distinctively virtuous desires are grounded in *phantasia* and thereby, ultimately, in evaluative perception – in pleasure.