

(>)

**SOUL'S HOLISTIC
COMPLEXITY AND
THE PLACE OF THE
IMAGINATION IN
ARISTOTLE'S CONCEPTION
OF THE SOUL**

Javier Aguirre Roman

SOUL'S HOLISTIC COMPLEXITY AND THE PLACE OF THE IMAGINATION IN ARISTOTLE'S CONCEPTION OF THE SOUL

Abstract: The aim of this text is to expose some of Aristotle's ambiguities about the place of imagination in his conception of the soul. Furthermore, the text presents a ground on which they might be solved. In the first part, it illustrates the ambiguities, and indicates Aristotle's awareness of it. In the second part it suggests that those ambiguities have to be understood and eventually solved in the field of a major conundrum, namely, the impasse about the parts of the soul. In this sense, it describes what I call soul's holistic complexity, and proposes it as an aspect of Aristotle's conception of the soul that might be useful in order to have a better understanding of Aristotle's concept of imagination.

Key words: Soul, holistic complexity, imagination.

LA COMPLEJIDAD HOLÍSTICA DEL ALMA Y EL LUGAR DE LA IMAGINACIÓN EN LA CONCEPCIÓN ARISTOTÉLICA DEL ALMA

Resumen: el objetivo del texto es exponer algunas de las ambigüedades de Aristóteles sobre el lugar que la imaginación ocupa en su concepción del alma. Además, el texto presenta un terreno conceptual sobre el cual podrían ser resueltas. En la primera parte, el texto ilustra tales ambigüedades. En la segunda el texto sugiere que todas ellas deben ser comprendidas y eventualmente resueltas sobre la base de un problema mayor, a saber, el problema de las partes del alma. En este sentido, el texto describe lo que se ha llamado "la complejidad holística del alma" y la propone como un aspecto de la concepción aristotélica del alma que podría resultar muy útil para desarrollar una mejor comprensión del concepto aristotélico de imaginación.

Palabras clave: alma, complejidad holística, imaginación.

Fecha de recepción: septiembre 6 de 2009
Fecha de aceptación: marzo 2 de 2010

Javier Aguirre Roman: Profesor Asistente e Investigador de la Escuela de Filosofía de la Universidad Industrial de Santander – Colombia, adscrito al Grupo de Investigación *Politeia*. Es Abogado y Filósofo. Actualmente adelanta estudios de Doctorado en Filosofía en la State University of New York at Stony Brook.

Correo electrónico: javiorlandoaguirre@gmail.com

SOUL'S HOLISTIC COMPLEXITY AND THE PLACE OF THE IMAGINATION IN ARISTOTLE'S CONCEPTION OF THE SOUL*

INTRODUCTION

In III.3 Aristotle presents imagination as an attribute of the soul different both from perceiving and from thinking (427b15). However, in other passages, Aristotle also indicates that some thinking activities require the presence of imagination. In all the following passages, for instance, Aristotle suggests or even explicitly affirms the close relation between thinking and imagination:

- "(...) thinking seems most of all to belong to the soul by itself; but if this is also some sort of imagination, or cannot be without imagination, it would not be possible for even this to be without the body" (403a10);

- "(...) without it (imagination) there is no conceiving that something is the case" (427b15);

- "But it is obvious that these two things cause motion, desire and/or intellect, if one includes imagination as an activity of the intellect" (433a10).

It also can be quoted the following passage from *On Memory and Recollection*, "And following what was said before about imagination in the writings on the soul, it is not possible even to think without an image" (450a).

* This text is the product of my doctoral research in the Ph.D program at the State University of New York – Stony Brook. In concrete, it was developed in my participation in the Aristotle's seminar coordinated by Professor Peter Manchester during the spring semester of 2009. The theoretical background of the text is threefold: a) Aristotle's own text, b) Thomas's commentary on Aristotle's book, and c) Nussbaum's text of essays.

Furthermore, in III.3 Aristotle defines imagination in terms of perception, insofar as for him, imagination “would be a motion coming about as a result of the being-at-work of sense perception, and corresponding to it” (429a).

Before reaching that definition, Aristotle, by contrasting imagination to thinking and to perception, indicates that imagination is present in the following activities:

- When we make images to fit things into a memory we make something appear before our eyes (427b20).
- When we make images of something terrifying or confidence-inspiring, although we do not feel the corresponding feeling (427b25).
- When we dream, images appear in some way (428a8).
- When we do not perceive clearly, for example, that something is a human being, we tend to say that we imagine that it is or that it is not (428a13).
- When our eyes are shut and visual images appear (428a15).

All these instances of actions in which imagination intervenes are, as can be seen, very different in kind and nature. In some of them it is not clear whether imagination “acts” by itself or in conjunction with perception or with intellect; and, if the latter options are correct, it is not clear either what the precise role and contribution of imagination is.

Thus, there seems to be an ambiguity about “the place” that imagination occupies in Aristotle’s description of the soul. In this sense one might ask: How different is really imagination both from perception and intellect? Is there an independent and separate imaginative potency of the soul? Is imagination a lower ranked part or potency of Aristotle’s account of the soul? These are just some of the questions that such account does not seem to solve.

The aim of this text is not to solve directly any of those problems. Nevertheless, it does intend to provide some ground on which they might be solved. Therefore, in the first part of my text I will try, on the one hand, to illustrate the mentioned ambiguity, and, on the other one, to indicate Aristotle’s awareness of it. Then, in the second part, I will suggest that those ambiguities have to be understood and eventually solved in the field of a major conundrum, namely, the impasse about the parts of the soul. In this sense, I describe what I call soul’s holistic complexity, and propose it as an aspect of Aristotle’s conception of the soul that might be useful in order to have a better understanding of Aristotle’s concept of imagination. Finally, in the last section of my paper I present some general conclusions.

1. ARISTOTLE'S ALLEGED AMBIGUITIES ABOUT IMAGINATION*

In order to illustrate the apparent lack of clarity of Aristotle's exposition on imagination, three quotes can be posited. All of them are found in Book II, the first one in Chapter 2, and the others in Chapter 3. The context of the three quotes is very similar, *i.e.*, Aristotle has enunciated his definition of the soul, and now he is presenting an introductory discussion about the relations between its potencies and how those potencies are present or absent among the different living things. These potencies are nutrition, perception, motion with respect to place, and thinking things through (414a30).

The first quote is this one:

(...) in the case of plants, some parts obviously live when divided and separated from each other, as though the soul in them is one in each plant in the sense of being-at-work-staying-itself but is in potency more than one, so too we see it happen with other capacities of the soul in the case of insects that have been cut in half; for each of the two parts even has both perception and motion with respect to place, and if it has perception, also imagination and appetite, since where there is perception there is also pains and pleasure, and where these are there is necessarily also desire (413b20).

From this text, it seems clear that for Aristotle if a living thing has perception, it must have imagination as well. However, in the second quote this affirmation is not maintained:

One must get clear about these things later, but for now let this much be said, that those living things that have touch also have appetite; it is unclear whether they must also have imagination, but this needs to be examined later (414b12).

Here, Aristotle doubts whether or not an animal that has touch, must also have imagination. In the final part of this third chapter Aristotle will say that "without the sense of touch none of the other senses is present" (415a5). Therefore, this second quote seems to doubt about something that Aristotle has already categorically affirmed, namely, that perception implies imagination.

Finally, the third quote states that in effect some animals despite of having perception, do not have imagination. In Aristotle's words:

* A detailed list of apparent ambiguities in Aristotle's exposition of imagination in III.3 that complement what I present here can be found in the article by Dorothea Frede *The cognitive role of Phantasia in Aristotle* included in *Essays on Aristotle's "De Anima"*, ed. Martha Nussbaum, p. 281. Also, the article by Malcolm Schofield, *Aristotle on Imagination*, included in the same volume (pp. 249-277), shows several apparent inconsistencies in Aristotle's exposition.

(...) reasoning is not present in all animals, but some do not even have imagination, though others live by this alone (415a10).

In III.3, the chapter dedicated extensively to imagination, Aristotle solves this apparent contradiction by distinguishing imagination from perception. This distinction allows Aristotle to affirm that perception is present in every animal, while imagination is not, as it is the case of a larval worm (428a10).

However, in III.11, Aristotle refers again explicitly to these animals. There, Aristotle affirms that in such animals, that are incompletely developed, perception is present only by touch. "But in what way could imagination be in them? Is it that, just as they move in an unspecific way, imagination too is present in them, but is in them in an unspecific form?" (434a5). This question is not solved by Aristotle, hence, ultimately it seems that he once again admits that every animal has imagination, although some of them, only have an unspecific form of it.

From another perspective, Thomas also seems to find some sort of unclarity in Aristotle's systematic exposition of imagination as it is presented in III.3. Indeed, in that chapter Aristotle differentiates imagination from intellect as well as from perception, and, finally, he states that imagination is "a motion coming about as a result of the being-at-work of sense perception, and corresponding to it" (429a3). Thomas, however, does not think that the relation among perception, intellect and imagination is clear insofar as Aristotle does refer to the first ones as "potencies of the soul", but does not do the same in regard to imagination. For Thomas:

Whether this movement also presupposes some potency other than the exterior senses, is a question which Aristotle leaves unanswered. Since, however, diverse acts imply diverse potencies, and diverse movements connote diverse receivers of movement (for the moving thing moves something other than itself), it seems necessary to posit an imaginative potency distinct from the exterior senses.*

According to Thomas, then, there must exist an imaginative potency that has the same status than the thinking and the perceiving ones. However, as Thomas himself notes it, Aristotle never affirms that such potency exists, although he never explicitly denies either that imagination, as a part or a power of the soul, has the same rank than the others just mentioned.

One might sustain, nevertheless, that the fact that Aristotle did not treat imagination in the same way as he treated nutrition, perception and intellect is a clear sign that imagination is different from them. Indeed, for nutrition, perception and thinking, Aristotle follows the methodology enunciated in II.4, namely, to inquire about

* Thomas Aquinas, *Commentary on Aristotle's De Anima*. Dumb Ox Books, Notre Dame, Indiana, 1994, p. 203, Lecture VI, 667.

the objects of the potencies first (food, perceptible things and intelligible things), and then to inquire about the activities and actions of those potencies (begetting offspring, perceiving and thinking). Moreover, one might also argue that Aristotle never mentions imagination along with the other potencies of the soul whenever he is apparently providing a complete list of them. For example, in II.3, Aristotle affirms that,

Now of the potencies of the soul, all of those that have been mentioned belong to some living thing, as we said, while to others some of them belong, and to still others only one. The potencies we are speaking of are those for nutrition, perception, motion with respect to place, and thinking things through (414a30).

But, do these observations imply that Thomas's argument is wrong? For, if Thomas is wrong, it would be necessary to explain how it is not true, on the one hand, that diverse acts imply diverse potencies and, on the other one, that diverse movements connote diverse receivers of movement. This claim is something that clearly requires a more careful examination* Nevertheless, the considerations exposed in the last paragraph at least do strengthen the discomfort that one might feel when one wonders the following: if it is, as Thomas says, absolutely necessary to posit an imaginative potency distinct from perception, then why Aristotle did not do it in a clear and simple way?

As it was said in the introduction, the aim of this paper is not to elaborate a solution to this conundrum, but only to indicate Aristotle's awareness of it, as well as to propose a field where, if possible, it should be solved. Both of those aspects may lie in the following words of Aristotle that I quote at length:

There is immediately an impasse, both as to the sense in which one ought to speak of parts of the soul, and how many there are. In a certain way they seem unlimited in number, and not just the ones some people speak of, dividing it up into reasoning, spirited, and desiring parts, or as others do, into what has reason and the irrational part. For in accord with the distinctions through which they separate these parts, the soul also obviously has other parts farther apart than these are, and which have been spoken about here: the nutritive part, which belongs both to the plants and to all animals, and the perceptive part, which one could not easily place either as

* Dorothea Frede, in the article quoted before presents the following reason for the non-existence of an independent imaginative potency: "That *phantasiai*, once they are separated from their origin, may change in quality and the object may change as well explains why Aristotle declares at times that most of them are false and misleading. Since there is no control, no special faculty in the soul, that 'keeps them in order', *phantasiai* can become mere appearances that drift in and out of our consciousness, reappear in dreams, or delude us in a state of fever. For that very reason Aristotle does not treat the *phantastike* as a separate faculty of the soul, but regards it as a phenomenon that supervenes on sense-perception" (p. 285).

irrational or as having reason, and also the imaginative part, though whether it is the same or different from any of them is a major impasse, if one is going to set down the parts of the soul as separate, and in addition to these the appetitive part which would seem to be different from them all both in its articulation and in its potency. And it is surely absurd to tear the soul apart in this way, since wishing ends up in the reasoning part, but desire and spiritedness in the irrational part; and if the soul is three things, there will be appetite in each of them (432a25).

On the one hand, Aristotle indicates one more time the impasse identified from Book I about whether or not the soul can be said to have parts. On the other one, Aristotle explicitly affirms that this impasse is closely related to the problem of distinguishing imagination from the perceptive and intellectual potencies of the soul. According to Aristotle, then, the “place” of the imagination in the soul will always be problematic as long as we continue thinking that the soul is in fact divided in parts as if they were distinct and separate places.

Hence, the ground on which the conundrums pertaining imagination might be solved is Aristotle’s proposal of conceiving that the soul is not divided or separated in the way mentioned. In other words, imagination’s nature and function in Aristotle’s systematic exposition demands that we understand what might be called “soul’s holistic complexity”.

2. SOUL’S HOLISTIC COMPLEXITY

In Aristotle’s list of impasses he states that “one must also examine whether it (the soul) is divisible or without parts, and whether all soul is of the same kind, or, if it is not of the same kind, whether souls differ as forms of one general class, or in their general classes” (402b).

The solution to this impasse, and the explanation of what “soul’s holistic complexity” means can be found in II.3. There, Aristotle indicates that despite of their divisions, soul’s potencies are always integrated within a single, unitary soul. For this reason, the potency for nutrition is different in plants and in animals, insofar as in the latter we can also find the potency for perception that, in some way, redefine the ways in which nutrition is put to work. In this sense, in the case of animals nutrition could be described in perceptual terms, and, in the case of humans, nutrition would always be informed by intellect. By the same token, we would have to be able to recognize how intellectual is perception (or how perceptual is thinking) of a being that has both the thinking potency and the perceiving one.

Almost at the end of Book I, Aristotle indicates that the conception of the soul according to which “it has parts, and thinks by means of one part but desires by

means of another" (411b5) faces the problem of explaining how, and by what aspect, the soul, as a whole, is held together. In Aristotle's words:

For it is surely not the body, for it seems rather to be the soul, on the contrary, that holds the body together; at any rate, when the soul has gone out of it, the body gives off vapors and rots away. So if some other thing makes it be one, that would be the thing most properly meant by soul. But about that thing in turn, it would be necessary to inquire whether it is one or has many parts. For if it is one, why is not the soul also one right from the start? But if it is divided, the argument will again ask what holds together, and so will proceed to infinity (411b8-15).

Right after this observation, Aristotle also affirms that this view of the soul also faces the problem of explaining how those separate parts of the soul affect and are related to the body; something very difficult to do especially for the intellect. According to Aristotle, "(...) if the soul holds together all of the body, it would be appropriate for each of its parts to hold together some part of the body. But this seems impossible, for what sort of part the intellect would hold together, and in what way, is difficult even to invent" (411b15-20).

Hence, although for some potencies of the soul it is possible to realize a clear tripartite exposition as indicated by Aristotle in II.4 (potency – activity – object), the Aristotelian soul is characterized by a "holistic complexity", which means that the soul is always a systematic whole in which the presence or absence of a potency determines the operation of the other ones.

A concrete paragraph that shows this notion of holistic complexity can be found in III.4, more exactly in 429b10 – 429b25. In that paragraph, Aristotle contrasts two kinds of objects, *i.e.*, sensible objects, on the one hand, and their thinghoods, on the other one. Moreover, Aristotle also contrasts two potencies, *i.e.*, one that distinguishes "being-flesh", namely the thinking potency, and one that distinguishes "flesh".

Aristotle also mentions that perception is the potency that distinguishes the objects of the senses, that is, hot, cold, etc. But he does not say explicitly and clearly that perception is the potency that distinguishes "flesh". In this sense, although flesh is not the same as "being-flesh", it is not either the same as a simple aggregate of colors, tastes, sounds, flavors, etc, for flesh, "in reality", is a matter-form compound. For Aristotle, "Flesh is not present without material, but like a snub nose, it is this in that" (429b15).

Aristotle explicitly affirms that "...being flesh is distinguished either by a different potency from the one that distinguishes flesh, or by the same one in a different relation" (429b12). But it has to be noticed that Aristotle never closes this dilemma. Based on this, we could interpret that both alternatives are correct, though we

have to understand that, in the first case, namely the case of a “different potency” than intellect, Aristotle would be talking about perception, though in the broad sense that includes the perception of the incidental sensible in conjunction with the intellect. Only in this way, this first alternative is equivalent to the second one, namely, “the same potency in a different relation”; which means, once again, intellect in combination with perception. Accordingly, for Charles H. Kahn,

Whereas an essence can be the object only of *nous*, the perception of the corresponding matter–form compound (flesh as a certain ratio of hot and cold, etc.) can be thought of in either of two ways: as the work of sense broadly understood (since the matter of flesh is properly sensible, and the compound body is a ‘sensible thing’, a sensible *per accidens*); or as the work of *nous* in a complex way (like a line bent in two). Thus *nous* is consistently presented as the capacity to apprehend forms and essences: both forms as embodied and forms alone, both forms in sensible compounds and in mathematical abstraction.*

In this sense, what I have called “soul’s holistic complexity” is an aspect of Aristotle’s conception that must be seriously taken into account in any interpretation of his treatise. Indeed, such aspect avoids that Aristotle’s divisions of the soul be taken as if Aristotle were proceeding atomistically, that is, from elementary parts to composite ones. Moreover, it cannot be forgotten that besides soul’s division into nutritive, perceiving and intellectual potency, Aristotle also distinguishes “two potencies of living things, that of discriminating, which is the work of reasoning and of sense perception, and that of causing motion with respect to place” (432a15).

CONCLUSION. SOUL’S HOLISTIC COMPLEXITY AND IMAGINATION

In the concrete case of imagination, soul’s holistic complexity might provide a useful tool to interpret the ambiguous and somehow dual character that Aristotle attributes it. Furthermore, it would help to explain why for Aristotle it was not so necessary to posit, as Thomas claims, an imaginative potency distinct from perception. In other words, the question about imagination’s clearly established place in Aristotle’s conception of the soul does not take into account that in such conception, no part of the soul really has a unique and determined place.

In the same vein, soul’s holistic complexity might provide useful tools to interpret the final chapters of *On The Soul*. Indeed, in those chapters, when Aristotle is explaining soul’s potency to cause motion with respect to place, imagination reappears. But what is particularly interesting in these chapters is that Aristotle

* KAHN, Charles, *Aristotle on Thinking* in “Essays on Aristotle’s De Anima”, ed. Martha Nussbaum, p. 371.

explicitly refers to two possible kinds of imagination, namely, one rational and one sensory (433b30), the first one present in humans, and the latter present in the other animals. In Aristotle words, "So a sensory imagination, as was said, is present in the rest of the animals, while there is a deliberative imagination in those that can reason" (434a5-10). An atomistic view of the soul might find difficulties to explain the existence of a sensory imagination and a deliberative one. Also, it might not be able to understand how a deliberative imagination can exist if imagination was defined as a movement resulting from perception.

Finally, soul's holistic complexity might help us to understand, in the case of human soul, how imagination establishes a crucial connection between intellect and perception, insofar as, for Aristotle, images are necessary both for practical and for theoretical reasoning, as it is indicated in the final chapters of *On The Soul*. Therefore, the systematic approach to imagination developed by Aristotle that tries to explain so many and diverse psychological phenomena that may be associated together under one general concept, should not be misunderstood by positing an atomistic conception that clearly is not Aristotle's ϕ

REFERENCES

Aristotle (2004). *On the Soul and On Memory and Recollection*. Translated by Joe Sachs. Green Lion Press.

Thomas Aquinas (1994). *Commentary on Aristotle's De Anima*. Notre Dame, Dumb Ox Books.

Martha C. Nussbaum & Amélie Oksenberg Rorty eds. (1992). *Essays on Aristotle's De Anima*, Oxford UP: Clarendon Press.