In his short treatise on memory and recollection Aristotle points out that we often come across someone or something that we have seen or heard before, but that we do not immediately recognise. Eventually, when an appropriate memory trace has been activated, it dawns on us that the object or person is familiar. The situation resembles perceiving a portrait first as a painting only and then proceeding to recognition that it represents a person with whom we are acquainted.

Aristotle then continues as follows (I, 451a 8–12):

γίνεται δὲ καὶ τούτων, ὅτι συνέβη Ἀντιφέρων τῷ Ὀρειπῷ καὶ ἄλλους ἐξεισαμένους· τὰ γὰρ φαντάσματα ἔλεγον ὡς γενόμενα καὶ ὡς μνημονεύοντες. τούτῳ δὲ γίνεται δὴν τῶν τὴν μὴ εἰκόνα ὡς εἰκόνα θεωρῆναι ("the opposite also occurs, as in the case of Antipheron of Oreos and other deranged individuals. They maintained their phantasmata to be things that had happened, as if remembering them at the time of their experience. This results from viewing what is not a likeness as if it were one.")

The crux is the meaning of phantasmata in this context. The consensus of modern commentators appears to be that it connotes, as it frequently does elsewhere in the Parva Naturalia, images in the mind's eye. In that case Antipheron, and the others to whom Aristotle alludes, would have misinterpreted random images conjured up by their imaginations as recollections of past events which they had witnessed or in which they had participated.

I do not find this interpretation particularly convincing. People whom no-one would dream of describing as deranged not uncommonly exhibit a degree of false memory and Aristotle would surely have expressed himself at greater length and in more detail had he not been alluding to some more determinate, more dramatic type of experience with which the familiarity of the majority of his readers, or listeners, could readily be anticipated.

The eleventh century AD commentator Michael of Ephesos felt it possible to understand phantasmata differently. His paraphrase of the key sentence runs: δεκεῖ ἡμῖν τὰ αἰσθήματα, ἀπερ οὕτος φαντάσματα εἰρηκεν, ὡς μνημονεύα ("our perceptions, this is the sense in which he used φαντάσματα, appear to us to be memories."). Thus far, I feel certain, Michael was on the right lines. I suggest that phantasmata here, as elsewhere in Aristotle, connotes the integrated presentations to the mind on the occasion of sense perception. The individuals to whom Aristotle refers, then, perceive new situations as repetitions of past experiences when actually this is not true.

This type of experience is commonly labelled déjà vu. It may occur in full
wakefulness to apparently healthy and normal persons. It occurs more frequently during stress, altered states of consciousness and, especially, the aura of epilepsy and migraine. Given his description of them as έξειστάμενοι, there is a strong possibility that Antipheron and the others whom Aristotle had in mind were epileptics or sufferers from aggravated migraine.

B. Autoscopy

Aristotle, Meteorologica, III, 4, 373b 1–10.

γίγνεται (sc. άνάκλασις) δὲ ἀπὸ μὲν ἀέρος, δὴν τύχῃ συνιστάμενος. διὰ δὲ τὴν τῆς ὑπεσχομένης πολλὰς ἀπειρίας τρίτη τινὰ πάθος ἡρέμα καὶ οὐκ ἐξείλειντ' ἄει γὰρ εἴδολον εἶδοκε προηγεῖσθαι βαδίζοντι αὐτῷ, εἰς ἐναντίας βλέπειν πρὸς αὐτόν. τοῦτο 3' ἐπασχε διὰ τὸ τὴν ὑπεσχομένης ἀνακλάσθαι πρὸς αὐτοῦν- ὀὕτω γὰρ ἁπάντη ἡν καὶ λεπτή πάμαν ὑπὸ τῆς Ἀρρωστίας, ὡστ' ἐνοπτρόν ἐγίγνετο καὶ ὁ πλησίον ἀηρ, καὶ οὐκ ἔδυνατο ἀποδείξεν. (“Air acts as a mirror when it is condensed; even when not condensed it may do so at times due to the weakness of the incident appearance. Such a circumstance is exemplified by the case of a man from whom light glanced in such a way as to be rendered feeble and unpenetrating. He continually perceived an image of himself directly confronting him and going before him as he walked. This was a consequence of his appearance being reflected back at him. Completely weak and attenuated on account of its loss of strength it was unable to penetrate the air close in front of him which accordingly functioned as a mirror.”)

The subject of the experience which Aristotle records was confronted, whenever he went walking, with a mirror-reversed image of himself which maintained a constant distance from his point of vision. Aristotle attempts an explanation in accordance with a view concerning the production of mirror images that resembles that outlined in Plato's Timaios. In itself the view is unexceptionable as far as it goes, but Aristotle's attempt to invoke extensions of it in the contexts of the unnamed subject's apparition and of such familiar natural phenomena as rainbows, while in conformity with the principle of economy, was scarcely felicitous.

That Aristotle's explanation of the hallucination was sheer rubbish was already apparent to the great third century AD commentator Alexander of Aphrodisia who proposed a more plausible, although equally erroneous etiology. Recognising, which is a fact, that images can be projected into the visual field as a result of physical disturbances in the eye, Alexander suggested that the primary cause of the subject's condition was κοσμαπτόν, that is what in current medical parlance is still technically termed a Musca volitans. Muscae volitantes, or more colloquially 'floaters', are debris or residues of embryonic development that continue to float uselessly in the aqueous or vitreous fluids that balloon out of the eye. Normally a floater merely produces an amorphous, cloud-like appearance in the field of vision, but Alexander went on to propose
that just as imaginative normal people detect resemblances to humans or animals in cloud formations, so the individual alluded to by Aristotle construed his entoptic image as a representation of himself.

This too, of course, is nonsense. Although a wide range of factors may play a role in the etiology of autoscopic hallucinations, of which Aristotle provides the earliest attested example, an underlying cerebral disturbance or disorder is always involved. Commonly, autoscopia is a transient phenomenon but comparatively recent cases are on record in which, as in that which came to Aristotle’s attention, the autoscopic image is recurrent or persistent or both. Invariably the autoscopic image is mirror reversed. The hallucinated percipient projects the representation of himself with which he is most familiar.

C. Antipheron

According to Alexander the autoscopia subject to whom Aristotle refers in the Meteorologica was none other than Antipheron of Oreos of whom, as Alexander puts it, ἐν ἄλλοις εἶρηκε (”he spoke elsewhere”). If Alexander had in mind only the reference in Memory and Recollection, then the reason for his identification is obscure.

A later commentator on the Meteorologica, Olympiodoros, writing in the sixth century AD, also associates the autoscopic hallucination described by Aristotle with Antipheron. However, Olympiodoros has it that Antipheron was a citizen of Italiote Taras and goes on to assert that Aristotle alluded to him ἐν τοῖς Ἡθικοῖς. The Nicomachean Ethics, of course, contains no reference to an Antipheron. It is tempting to suppose that Olympiodoros was merely guilty of two slips of memory. Recalling Alexander’s comment he misrecollected Antipheron’s ethnic; he then referred Aristotle’s specific allusion to Antipheron to the wrong work.

Still later, in his comment on the Memory and Recollection passage where Aristotle mentions Antipheron, Michael of Ephesos, too, identifies Antipheron of Oreos with the subject of the autoscopia case described in the Meteorologica. Having done so he eventually goes on to attempt, in a palpably tentative and convoluted manner, to interpret the condition referred to in Memory and Recollection as autoscopia. The most economical supposition is that in his identification, Michael also was influenced by Alexander of Aphrodisia.

What are we to make of Alexander’s identification?

On the face of it there is no reason whatsoever for inferring that the individual with autoscopic hallucinations described in the Meteorologica and Antipheron of Oreos, whose illusions of déjà vu are described in Memory and Recollection, are identical. Very possibly they are not, and Alexander must be convicted of baseless conjecture.

It is a fact, however, that, like déjà vu, autoscopia can feature in the aura of migraine and epilepsy. If one regards it as consistent with Aristotle’s exposition in the Meteorologica passage, and it may well be felt that this is a big
if, that the subject saw an image of himself not every time that he went for a walk, but only whenever he happened to be walking at the time that a migraine or epilepsy aura commenced, it becomes conceivable at least in principle that he and Antipheron were one and the same. If they were, then one’s conclusion would have to be that Alexander was apprised of this fact by some general treatment of Antipheron’s pathology in a lost work of Aristotle. In addition one would be free to speculate that Olympiodoros was not completely dependent on Alexander, that his only error concerned Antipheron’s place of birth, and that Ἡθικοῖς in his text is a corruption of the title of the lost Aristotelian work consulted both by himself and Alexander.

NOTES

2. Oreos was a small town in Euboia.
3. See, for example, the paraphrase on p. 237 of W.D. Ross’ edition of the Parva Naturalia (Oxford 1955). The translation of the passage on p. 52 of Richard Sorabji’s edition (Aristotle on Memory, London 1972) reflects a similar interpretation; however, the striking absence of any discussion within his commentary might be taken to suggest that he had his doubts about the conventional view.
5. For citation of relevant passages together with discussion, see J. Beare, Greek Theories of Elementary Cognition, Oxford 1906, 290 ff.
7. It may be felt that I have supplied a paraphrase rather than a translation. To some extent this is true; δῆμης and βλέπνεν are particularly difficult to render in this passage which has had all commentators floundering. One thing is certain; we must avoid reading into the text a temporary adherence by Aristotle to the Platonic theory, which he attacked at De Sensu II, 437b 9 ff, of visual rays proceeding from the eye.
8. See Plato, Timaios, 46a–b. Aristotle did not, of course (see the previous note), share Plato’s view that the mirror image, once produced (by ‘external light’) is brought to the eye through the agency of visual rays (‘internal light’).
9. Aristotle’s treatment of the rainbow (Meteorologica, III, 4, 373a 32 ff.), the general context in which his account of the apparition appears, is vitiated by his failure to make any clear distinction between reflection and refraction.
11. On so-called entoptic images, see, for example, Horowitz, op. cit. 23–24.
13. See Fredericks, op. cit. 231.
18. See Fredericks as cited at note 12 above and also Sacks, op. cit. 99.

Monash University, Clayton, Victoria

PETER BICKNELL
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