

# The model of intentionality in Aristotle<sup>1</sup>

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## Модель интенциональности у Аристотеля Хао Лиу

**Abstract.** This paper investigates Aristotle's theory of psychology and build up a model of intentionality based on it. It is revealed that the active factor of intentionality in modern sense is not always the case for Aristotle. The active factor in Aristotle is more about voluntary intentional act and it is primarily a concept formed in later time. Aristotle otherwise provides a content theory of intentionality by virtue of the presentation of things to the subject, which also reveals a consistency between the intellectual soul and the world.

**Keywords:** intentionality, *phantasia*, representation, active factor

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**Резюме.** В данной статье исследуется теория психологии Аристотеля и на ее основе строится модель интенциональности. Выявлено, что активный фактор интенциональности в современном понимании не всегда является таковым у Аристотеля. Активный фактор у Аристотеля больше относится к добровольному намеренному действию и является прежде всего концепцией, сформированной в более позднее время. В остальном Аристотель дает содержательную теорию интенциональности в силу представления вещей субъекту, что также выявляет согласованность между интеллектуальной душой и миром.

**Ключевые слова:** интенциональность, фантазия, представление, активный фактор.

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*Введение*

1. Как начинается история
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*Заключение*

**Introduction.** There has been a revival of research interest about intentionality in Aristotle in these three decades,<sup>3</sup> the topic of which can date back to Franz Brentano in the 19th century. With Brentano's well-known proposal of intentionality in *Psychology from an Empirical Standpoint*, an easily overlooked footnote comes along, which refers to Aristotle's theory of psychology for the inspiration.<sup>4</sup> Brentano refers to Aristotle's depiction of perception and intellect, especially the way of "receiving form without matter" in acquiring information. I would like to investigate whether Aristotle has something to say about intentionality, and to what extent can we built up a model of intentionality for Aristotle.

### 1. How the story begins

We will firstly follow Brentano's step to see how he relates intentionality to Aristotle, and then deal with Aristotle's theory of psychology. When proposing the notion of intentional in-existence, Brentano refers to Aristotle in that, "Aristotle himself spoke of this mental in-existence. In his books on the soul he says that the sensed object, as such, is in the sensing subject; that the sense contains the sensed object without its matter; that the object which is thought is in the thinking intellect" [Brentano, 2009, p.67]. Brentano depicts intentional in-existence as the characteristic of mental phenomenon, which is reference to a content, direction towards an object or immanent objectivity.<sup>5</sup> It reveals that the in-formed object which are acquired by virtue of receiving form without matter is what Brentano refers to for intentional in-existence.

The reference in Aristotle actually comes as "about all perception, we can say that a sense is what has

<sup>3</sup> See Victor Caston [1998], Richard Sorabji [1991,1992,2001], Myles Burnyeat [1995], Christopher Shields [1995].

<sup>4</sup> Franz Brentano, *Psychology from An Empirical Standpoint*, trans. Antos C. Rancurello, D. B. Terrell, and Linda L. McAlister (London UK: Routledge, 2009), p. 67, hereafter abbreviated as PES.

<sup>5</sup> PES, P.68.

the power of receiving into itself the sensible forms of things without the matter. (DA 424a18-20).” It incurs heated debate as to what kind of alteration it is [Sorabji 1992, 2001; Burnyeat 1995; Caston 1996; Everson 1997; Lorenz 2007; Magee 2000]. What’s more, contemporary debates probe the possibility of intentionality based on different interpretations about it.

Sorabji points out that perceptual appearance is propositional, and this propositional content or the formal part of perception reveals the intentional implication.<sup>6</sup> Burnyeat follows Brentano in taking the spiritual interpretation of sensation but he instead regards perceptual awareness of the sensible quality as intentional.<sup>7</sup> Caston denies that Brentano’s reference to Aristotle about receiving form without matter supports the acceptance of a general mode of intentionality.<sup>8</sup> Rather, he explicates a representative mode of intentionality in Aristotle by virtue of *phantasia*.<sup>9</sup>

None of Sorabji, Burnyeat and Caston agrees with Brentano in relating intentionality to Aristotle’s theory of receiving form without matter. Instead, Sorabji relates intentionality to the propositional content, Burnyeat argues that intentionality lies in perceptual awareness, whereas Caston turns to *phantasia*. In modern sense, intentionality is generally the capacity of an active agent to be about or refer to something. Depending on the definition of intentionality, we are to deal with Aristotle’s theory of psychology to see how it implies intentionality there.

## 2. Sensation and intentionality

In Aristotle’s perceptual theory, since the form cannot exist independently without matter, the form received by the sensible patient will be combined with the physical sense organ once there is sensory stimulation. By virtue of this, the potential state of the perceptual power becomes actualized, and the sense organ captures the corresponding form to become identified with it in sense. For example, when

<sup>6</sup> “Intentionality and Physiological Processes: Aristotle's Theory of Sense-Perception.” In Martha C. Nussbaum and Amélie Oksenberg Rorty (ed.), *Essays on Aristotle's De Anima*. Clarendon Press. 1992, pp. 195–225.

<sup>7</sup> Burnyeat, M. F. “Is an Aristotelian Philosophy of Mind Still Credible? (A Draft)” In Nussbaum and Rorty(eds.), *Essays on Aristotle's De Anima*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, (1995): 15–26. (First published, 1992.)

<sup>8</sup> As such, Caston lists three objections: first, he believes that the example of the wax and signet ring is not about an intentional state; second, he does not believe that there is an aboutness involved there, because “receiving form without matter” does not signal the notion of being about something; third, he believes that this formulation is still a causal doctrine and the sensible form’s acting upon the patient shows a causal relation. However, in the case of thinking about non-existent objects, there does not seem to be a form.

<sup>9</sup> Caston, Victor. “Aristotle and the Problem of Intentionality.” *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 58.2 (1998): 249-298.

the color red is present, the sense organ is impressed by that color, and at that moment, the characteristic or state the sense organ reveals is red. But, since the hosts to which the color is associated can differ, so too do the states of coloration in sensation and in the sensible object differ.

In this way, the percipient subject acquires sensible content, which is identity with the sensible object in actuality, thus provides a consistency between soul and the world. Even though admitting to the alteration that the sense organ suffers, it does not mean to be taken as a literal material change in the same sense as the sensible quality's acting on the sensible object. Instead, I adopt the position that because of the different material substrates, the alteration caused by the sensible form in sensation will inherently be different from that in the sensible object.<sup>10</sup> Hence, the sensible form (for example, "redness"), can color the sensible object as such, but it is not plausible to state that the sense organ will equally suffer the same change, because the material substrate of the percipient patient is the bodily organ. It differs from the material constitution of the sensible object.<sup>11</sup>

By virtue of receiving form without matter, the sensory subject acquires the sensory information, get identity with the sensible object, and further, become aware of this sensory process. We can best say the sensory subject has a sensible content with regard to the sensible object, but it is not the case that the received sensible form can be regarded as an intentional object, as Brentano means. Brentano himself is tangled with the problem of content and object in his first stage and changed his proposal of intentionality as a quasi-relation to a real thing. The impediment of viewing the received form as intentional object is that there will be trouble explaining the ontology of the intentional object, the difficulty of double objects and the block from the external world.

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<sup>10</sup> Thomas Aquinas equally expresses that the form in sense organ and the form that appears in the sensible object will have a different effect because the material substrates are different. Contemporary scholars such as Everson(1999) preserves Aristotle's distinction between sense organ and perceptual capacity and stresses that it is the sense organ that incurs the alteration rather than the perceptual capacity. Everson's assessment about "receiving form without matter" is that "for the organ to take on the form of the sensible object, then, is for it to take on a property which is distinctive of the substance's matter" [p. 102]. Lorenz [2007] claims that the perceptual power suffers the alteration of a non-destructive change. It is the sense or intellect which are the potentialities that are open to be informed by the perceptible and intelligible form which constitutes the assimilation between sense or intellect and their object. Perception "involves both an ordinary change or modification in a sense organ and a certain kind of change or quasi-change undergone by a sensory power.

<sup>11</sup> This can be certified by the claim in *On Generation and Corruption*, "In action, there is nothing to prevent the first agent being unaffected, while the last agent only acts by suffering action itself. For if things have not the same matter, the agent acts without being affected; thus the art of healing produces health without itself being acted upon in any way by that which is being healed." (CC. 324a34-36).

All in all, perception is both the potential perceptual faculty's becoming actualized as well as the sense organ's suffering the alteration in a non-ordinary physical manner. The percipient faculty changes from the state of second potentiality/first actuality to second actuality. In this event, what is percipient actualizes what otherwise is only potentially perceiving by virtue of the sense organ's suffering a qualitative alteration rather than physical change. That is to say, by receiving form without matter, what sensation acquires is a principle that define what kind of sensation it will be, along with the qualitative alteration in sense organ. By virtue of the qualitative alteration, the sensory state is prepared with the sensory content about that particular sensible object, thus getting defined by the form of that sensible object. When I say "get defined by something", it implies that the sensory state is about the thing which defines it. It is in this way that Aristotle elaborates what is going on in sensation.

Meanwhile, sensation is not just a sheer receptivity of the object, it is a complex activity including the assimilation of the percipient sense and the perceptual object, as well as the perceptual awareness. In this way, the in-formed sensible object provides a kind of sensory presentation to the subject. This wording implies the roots of intentionality from the perspective of intentional content. Worth noting, it is not in the same sense as the modern term since there is no active factor playing its role in perceptual mechanism. Both Sorabji and Burnyeat noticed the intentional implication in sensation by focusing either the propositional content or perceptual awareness. For me, intentionality is revealed under the comprehensive conditions of sensation.

But this is not the end of the story. We just investigated how intentionality can be implicated in sensation. Intentionality further shines its light in Aristotle's depiction of *phantasia* and intellect, in this way can we have a comprehensive picture of intentionality in Aristotle.

### 3. *Phantasia* and intentionality

Among the meanings of *phantasia* we find "a presentation to consciousness, whether immediate or in memory, whether true or illusory" (Liddell and Scott, Lexicon, "*phantasia*"). In contemporary Aristotle scholarship, there is a tendency of regarding *phantasia* as representation (Nussbaum 1978; Everson 1999; Polansky 2007; Modrak 2016)<sup>12</sup>, i.e. as representing what the sensory appearance is.

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<sup>12</sup> Nussbaum [1978] elaborates on *phantasia* stating that in all cases it involves images that represent the object in virtue of some similarity to the object. Everson [1999] argues that given Aristotle's apparent emphasis on the connection between action and *phantasia*, it seems reasonable to take *phantasia* to constitute the activity of the rich representational system which perception is not, and which is required for a subject to be an agent. He attributes the active factor to *phantasia* so as to make a distinction between perception and *phantasia*, which lies in that the former shows that it appears to be a man and the latter shows that I see a

According to Lagerlund, “the word representation came to philosophy along with the Latin translation of Avicenna’s *De Anima*”<sup>13</sup>. It was only in late Medieval Age that representation is to explain the content of thought.

Generally speaking, “representation” in the modern sense seems to imply that there is an active mental subject which carries on a presentation of the object. We see that Caston [1998] attributes *phantasia* an active causal power. Nussbaum also spells out intentionality in *phantasia* because of *phantasia*’s active role in focusing on one thing, as she says, “we are always passively receiving perceptual stimuli; but when we actively focus on some object in our environment, separating it out from its context and seeing it as a certain thing, the faculty of *phantasia*, or the *phantasia* aspect of *aesthesis* is called into play” [Nussbaum,1978, p.259].

In my view, *phantasia* is an intention to know, the desire to perceive. It is reasonable to attribute a causal power to *phantasia*, considering that *phantasia* has the causal power to make up cognitive information based on the residual sensible information, and activate it from potentiality to actuality. Generally speaking, every time we perceive something, the sensible form acts on the sense organ with the alteration occurring in sensation. Further this sensible alteration is transmitted to the central sense, which on the one hand marks the perceiving of something, on the other hand, it activates *phantasia*. In this way, *phantasia* can deal with the received information for the application of other cognitive activity. Also, in the absence of the present sensible object, *phantasia* can still work on the stored sensible materials for thinking, memory, recollection, and so on.

Aristotle’s psychological building relies heavily on perception, which occupies a large part of the content in *De Anima*. However, the condition of the presence of the sensible object also limits what we can conceive. *Phantasia* compensates for this disadvantage to some extent, by not only following closely after perception to conceive the sensible image and pass it to the central sense but also by making use of the residual image to create a new image even when there is no object present. Of course, it also introduces the consequences of fallibility – however, there is no better way than to formulate such an efficient capacity to explain the quasi-rational activity of animals and enlarge the

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man. Polansky [2007] indicates that Aristotle does not depict *phantasia* as a critical and discriminative faculty (like sense and thought), but a faculty of presentation or representation. Modrak [2016] claims that “any object that can be the content of a perception can be presented in a *phantasma* (object of *phantasia*) and the content so presented may be an accurate representation of an actual object or it may fall short of accuracy due to the conditions under which it is realized.” [p.17]

<sup>13</sup> Lagerlund [2021].

function that the perceptual faculty can do. Ultimately, it has the additional advantage of offering an explanation for perceptual error.

As we clarified, *phantasia* can make use of the in-formed sensible object for other cognitive activities. It is clear that *phantasia* is involved in intentional content in many ways, by actively presenting objects, or by creating new images for the subject. Aristotle carefully proposes the relation of likeness between the inner image and previous events. In this way, intentional content is always in some way related to the external world, and thus reveals the continuity between the intellectual soul and the world.

#### 4. Intellect and intentionality

The most majored feature of intentionality lies in an active agent having the capacity to refer to or be about something. As is always say, whenever we think, there is something that is thought about. When we desire, we are desiring for something. In order to strive for a comprehensive picture of intentionality in Aristotle, we shall spell out how intellect works in Aristotle's theory and see how intentionality reveals there.

Humans are active in initiating thought activities. As Aristotle claims, "it is perhaps better to say, not that the soul pities or learns or thinks, but that the human being does these due to the soul" (*DA* 408b12-14). Humans have the capacity to freely select and decide what to think and ponder, which indicates that humans have the efficient power, which is the intellectual soul, to pay attention to, consider, desire, etc. a particular object or state of affairs. Humans' efficient power provides the condition for the encounter of the intelligible object and the intellectual soul. After thought is initiated, the active intellect, which is the possessed knowledge, illumines the intelligible object which we prefer. This intelligible object acts as the first actuality upon the passive intellect, so as to actualize the potential intellect and itself into second actuality.

In a concrete example of thought, the active intellect and the receptive thought cannot separate from one another. Once the initiating factor of thought is stimulated (it can be desire, habit, or just an idea popping up, etc.), the active intellect will illumine the corresponding intelligible form from the storage of knowledge to produce the intelligible object we want, and the actualized intelligible form will act on the receptive intellect, thus realizing thought. So, the function of the active intellect is just to provide the possibility for thought. For example, when we think of a tree which is green and big, in order for the receptive thought to accept it and become identical with it (it is impossible to have a real material tree in us, what we have is only the form), the active thought will illuminate the related sensible information about this tree from our memory and provide an intelligible form engaged in

image for the receptive intellect. Because the receptive soul only has the capacity to receive, it cannot make the actuality come true by itself. Similarly, the approach from the intelligible form to the receptive intellect is like that of the sensible form to the perceptual soul. The occurrence of perception requires the presence of the sensible object, within which the sensible form is an active factor.

Therefore, my interpretation is that thought is initiated by humans. Once we think, the active intellect (the possessed knowledge) illuminates the potential intelligible form, and the actualized intelligible form (accompanied with the sensible image) acts on the receptive intellect. In this operation, the active intellect is responsible for illuminating the potential intelligible while *phantasia* serves to provide a sensible image to pack the intelligible form. The initiating factors of thought can be desire, the external stimulation, etc., with the active intellect as the auxiliary cause. That is to say, the efficient cause of thinking is not the active intellect, but humans. Henceforth, it is plain to say that the intellectual act rests on a combination of initiators: humans who has the auxiliary function of the active intellect. Such intellectual act can also be regarded as voluntary intentional act, or to say intentionality in the practical sense.

In describing the capacity of animals for local motion, it is revealed that animals can pursue or avoid an end based on its impulse. As is said, “for this kind of movement is always for an end and is accompanied either by imagination or by appetite; for no animal moves except by compulsion unless it has an impulse towards or away from an object.” (DA 432b16-17) This impulse towards or away from an object will directly influence how the animal selects and responds to the perceptible. Because of the lack of intellect, it should be supposed that animals’ tendency toward the perceptible is out of physiological desire, and meanwhile, it carries out motion in the practical sense of intentionality. However, since (in human beings) there may be no object present for the intellect to cognize, intellect should hence make something out in the preparatory stage. It can pay attention to something in the external reality, select what we already have from the storage of memory, or create a new intelligible form from it. That is the difference between perception and intellect at the starting point.

As we know, Brentano attributes the characteristic of intentionality to the mentally active subject, which refers to or directs to an intentional object. However, as we disclose, even though humans are free to think whatever they want, the inner mechanism of intellect is much more complex. It is composed of different stages of act. The first stage is the intelligible form’s acting on the potential intellect where the intellect is passive in receiving what acts on it. The second stage is the actualized intellectual soul, which is identical with the intelligible object. In this way, the intellectual subject is occupied with the cognized content, and Aristotle does not especially depict a relation directed from the actualized intellectual subject to the object at this stage, since it is just the actualized intellectual

subject's becoming identical with the intelligible object because of the object's efficient cause. In the third stage, because we are already occupied with the psychic content based on stage two, we can selectively pay attention to or focus on the intelligible object which is composed either on a remaining image or previous knowledge, or which is external. This is voluntary intentional act and the active factor is revealed on this level.

It is in the third stage that I infer the intellect in first actuality is intentional in that it has such an active power to select or pay attention to a particular object, which can both exist or not exist. Humans initiate thinking out of multiple reasons, which can be desire, habit, memory, etc. The intellectual capacity to think whatever it wants explains the characteristic of being "selective", or the active factor of intentionality. It is able to select intelligible objects either based on the present object or the possessed knowledge. In addition, the active factor is also expressed by virtue of the unified means of intellect, which is able to discern and judge the intelligible object. By deliberately thinking and judging, we are able to make decisions to guide our action –and that is also the difference between animals and human beings.

The active aspect of intellect explains intentionality in the broad sense, expressing a voluntary intentional act to whatever we would like to ponder on or be concerned with. But it is intellect in a different stage compared to the intellectual soul's cognition, which is operated by the active intellect and the receptive intellect with the aid of sensible image. Thinking is based on sensation, which provides it with the sensible image, and when there is no sensation, it is *phantasia* that deploys the image for thought. The intelligible object cannot come to us without the image. Rather, it is the process that the active intellect illuminates the intelligible form, and then the intelligible form is received by the receptive thought.

Moreover, as we clarified in perception, the perceptual soul and the perceptual object are better referred to as being identical in actuality rather than being involved in a relational mode. The same is true for intellect: Aristotle does not especially elaborate a relation between the intellectual soul and its object. Therefore, at this stage, the potential intellectual soul is passive when receiving the intelligible form rather than actively directed towards it. It is only in the broad sense—that is, intellect in first actuality—that intellect is able to aim to, select, refer to the intelligible object, which implies active factor.

Aristotle spends quite a lot of time describing the perceptual basis, or the role of *phantasia* in supporting the appearance of the intelligible object. The conjunction of the intelligible form with *phantasia* provides materials to mental content when the intelligible form is being cognized. In this

way, the roots of intentional content come to the fore in Aristotle's theory of intellect. This is consistent with the content theory of intentionality we disclose in Aristotle.

**Conclusion.** We find that the characteristic of aboutness, or to say, intentional content, is always there in Aristotle's psychology. That is why we attribute a content theory of intentionality to Aristotle. However, it is not what a contemporary interpretation of intentionality means. Since when we attribute "the active factor" of intentionality to Aristotle, it is not always the case. Aristotle's perceptual/intellectual mechanism is primarily driven by the explanation of four causes, according to which the perceptual/intellectual subject is passive to be acted on by its objects, which is the efficient/formal cause. Because of the peculiarity of the intellectual mechanism, we found the active factor located on the level of voluntary intentional act. When it comes into the intellectual soul's receipt of the intelligible form, it shows no active factor but follows the same pattern as perception.

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