

Aristotle, quotation nr 1

1. Introduction

Aristotle, a Greek, Ancient philosopher, focuses in the quotation on the human ability of expressing the thoughts. Therefore, the quotation finds its place in the vast domain of philosophy called the philosophy of language. Aristotle presents here a vision of the components of the process of expressing the thought and equally looks for some similarities in expressing the thoughts in the whole mankind. In other words he tries to answer the question why people can communicate, if their bodies and languages are different.

The key-words of the quotation are “spoken sounds”, “written marks”, “affections of the soul” and “actual things”. These are components of human possibility to utter some thoughts. Aristotle presents the relation between them as follows:

The base for all the possibility of utterance are actual things, so something that we can talk about. Actual things provoke some thoughts. He called it “affections of the soul”. The name seems today really poetic, but it covers as well the idea that these are some perceptions which can affect our soul or our mind. The next element are spoken sounds, when people utter the thought (because we can call the affection of soul a thought) and communicate it so that other people could understand it. The third component are written marks which are symbols of spoken sounds.

This was his vision of the process of expressing the thoughts. The next and essential part of this scheme is the relation between all those components and the whole mankind. Aristotle claims that even if sounds and written marks are different for all the people, the affections of soul are the same and the actual things are shared by everyone. It assumes the realistic interpretation of the world when everybody lives in the one world which is objectively accessible to our inquiry. Consequently, the object of inquiry is not the subjective representation, but something that is universally accessible. The other even more strong assumption is that people’s affections, so thoughts are in fact the same, while they talk about the same things. It is based on the likeness of thoughts to the actual things.

The aim of that quotation is to find some common features of the process of using a language and through it present some general features for the whole mankind. In fact it would be worth a notice that Aristotle formulated a definition of a man as a creature which possesses *logos*, so translating it into English, s/he possesses word, thought and ability of expressing it. It is quite important because it assumes an anthropology, in which the essential feature of mankind is the possibility to communicate and to express thoughts, referring to the real world. It introduces a social orientation of language and mankind conceiving.

Briefly, the most important and interesting theses of the text are:

1. The affections in the soul (which I am going to call thoughts) are the same when people mean the same thing.
2. We can find bases for human anthropology referring to the possibility of communication.

In the next parts of my essay I am going to tackle essentially the first problem which I find more important. I will give some notes on the second one in the section of final remarks, but the first problem will be essential. I am going to tackle it referring mostly to the thought of Ludwig Wittgenstein. I will face some problematic situations which could call into question the Aristotle's stance and through it formulate my own view on the bases of it.

2. What can we talk about? – Mental states?

The first thing we are going to face is to sketch the domain of what can be uttered, so in fact we will start similarly to Aristotle's attitude. We will start with what he called actual things. I think it was a proper intuition to look for the nature of the inquiry, mankind and the world by grasping the idea of human language usage – and looking for the relation of the language and the world (so with the semantical approach). Of course we formulate some sentences about our perceptions, e.g. "the computer is on the table". One would easily say that two people who utter this proposition think about the same state of affairs. However, what about some mental states, which I can describe? If there were nothing in common when two people say that they feel satisfied or sad, the psychology as an empirical science would be impossible, since these are the protocol-sentences which psychology can be based on (in a quite simplified version). The states of mind seem more subjective than the sentences about the computer of the table. However these are protocol-sentences as well and they are to certain extent similar to the sentences about computers.

In fact, they describe external world as well. Wittgenstein gave a nice simile which let us get through what can be uttered. When I wrote a book called *The world as I found it*. I should write about all that I know, all that I see, I could describe as well in which cases I say that I

am sad or happy and the biological base for it. The content of this book would embrace the whole description of the world – of the external world. The internal world shrinks to a point of no extension, since one cannot utter the subject and one always has to say something from a standpoint of one's consciousness. The subject seems therefore the first limit of thought or rather the first limit of possibility of utterance. The world as I see converges with the world as it is – so a realistic interpretation converges with an idealist one.

I cited it, because it seems useful to take a look on it in order to find a proper place of talking about mental states, as it could seem that they refer to an internal world which could cause the denial of Aristotle's stance, as the two phrases of the same form uttered by two different people would not refer to the same affection. I assume here that pain in itself is not a thought, but the proposition that "I feel pain" is already one because it is true when the real state of the person corresponds to a convention of using a word "pain" and refers to a real biological state of the person. Consequently, there still are some similarities when a person X says "I feel pain", and the person Y says "X feels pain", since it is always uttered from a stance of one's consciousness, either the unutterable consciousness of the person X or Y.

3. What can we talk about? – Unexisting states of affairs?

When I say "The computer is on the table" and I indicate simultaneously this computer and this table, it seems that another person who would utter the same phrase would be expressing the same thought. However, what about thinking about something that in fact does not exist? I will use here a famous example of the proposition "the present King of France is bald" which was used by Bertrand Russell in his article about denoting.

I think that I can imagine a person, and imagine him as a present King of France, and furthermore imagine that he is crowned and bald. For Russell the true-value of this sentence was problematic because it seems neither true nor false because the present King of France simply does not exist. I will not focus on the problem raised by Bertrand Russell, because it would not be useful for the subject of the essay. However, I am going to formulate it in a form which let consider it as a proposition which is true or false by virtue of the real, existing states of things. The form would be as follows: "There is x, and x is crowned as a present King of France, and x is bald". The proposition is false because there is no such a person who were a present King of France. It is not nonsensical. Indeed, what's about the Aristotle's thought, since Aristotle holds that thoughts are based on the actual (existing) things.

Herein, we obtain the first reproach to Aristotle's stance. We saw that we can formulate some sentences which embody some thoughts, which have no denoting object. Simply, there is not such a fact about any person of being on the throne of France, nowadays. However, it is not impossible to a person to be a King of France, so the proposition is not nonsensical. We can formulate a sentence and imagine such a situation. Herein, we should

change something in the Aristotle's viewpoint. The sentences can refer as well to a possible states of thing and not only to actual ones.

When two people utter a mentioned-above proposition about the computer being on the table, what those sentences (and thoughts) have in common is the denoting objects and the fact that the computer really is on the table. However, when two people talk about the present King of France there should also be something similar in their thoughts, and this is the form, the multiplicity of the proposition – so that they think about a one person, France, and a relation of being a King of a country. This example introduce us to the more general conclusion.

4. Differences between people's thoughts

The last point would be more visible in another example. Imagine that one person says "a palm has leaves". In fact when someone grasps the word palm, s/he really can imagine a palm having leaves. The second person hears the first uttering this phrase and s/he also starts to think about a palm having leaves or even says on their own – "a palm has leaves". The picture in their minds can differ to certain extent, since it is not an observation sentence and does not refer to any particular tree. In the picture of the first person the palm can be taller than in the picture of the second person. There can be more or less leaves and they can be either green or brown. However, those two pictures have something in common. In both of them there is an item which in the language of those two people is called a palm and some items which are called leaves. The other possible facts are not important. And that is the form and multiplicity which is the same in people's sentences and thoughts. Therefore, the thoughts which in fact can only present a picture of reality (possible states of things) are not really identical, as Aristotle seems to claim. Nevertheless, they have something in common. Besides, those pictures, with no further explanaitions, differ because we cannot imagine a palm which has no size at all, even if the sentence refers only to the fact of having leaves.

That is the solution for thoughts about the present King of France, which has been presented above, but that is also a solution for mental states which were discussed previously. It is also a multiplicity which is the same in the utterances of two people – person X stating "I feel pain" and person Y stating "Person X feel pain". It is completely unimportant that in the second sentence "the I" turns into "Person X". The note about internal and external world gave some evidence to it. The source of that knowledge is not important. The multiplicity contains one person and a possible fact of him/her that s/he feels pain (with the whole biological bases for pain).

We should note as well its significance in the problem of translation, because when Aristotle writes about spoken sounds which are different he could mean different languages. I will not focus immensely on this problem, because it would demand a further discussion.

However, the vision of the elements of sentences seen as names – so a name “palm”, a personal name as Aristotle, etc. simplifies the vision of translation, because it would demand only some dictionary of conventional word translation and it would always be a form and multiplicity which would be the same. Of course, often some translators have problems with translations of novels, because words often have a misleading form which purports to state a fact as “the present King of France” which in fact is not a name, but misleading form of a proposition. We see that ordinary language sometimes conceals the form. I ignore here the problems of art novel’s translation and I am focussing rather on the language of natural sciences, which is more distinct and do not refer to people’s aesthetic impressions as in the example of novels.

5. Some final notes and conclusion

At first, one more note would be useful here. In my essay, I should have focused on the problem of thoughts, as it dictates the most essential thesis which I chose at the beginning. However, I deliberately often talked about propositions and sometimes I put thoughts in parentheses, because it contains a very important problem which the activity of talking about thoughts is always encumbered with. We use only propositional form to communicate thoughts (I will not focus on some gestures). Consequently, talking about thoughts has a propositional form as well. We cannot say what is beyond this part of thought which can be uttered.

I focused on the first thesis which I mentioned at the beginning, because the first one was in my opinion more interesting whereas both of them would demand a longer discussion which because of the lack of time cannot be held *ad infinitum*. However, from the simile taken from Tractatus derives a very interesting vision of human unpresence in the uttered propositions. Human presence reveals itself by the fact that the propositions and thoughts are *my* thoughts and that they are built in the only language, *I* know. The subject evaporates in a certain sense.

Traditionally, language as a tool for communication really tended to make a difference between human and animal. Nevertheless, the research of animal’s thinking possibilities and its ways of communication are the question of science, not philosophy. Philosophy can only find some reflexion within this domain on some scientific results. Personally, I think that a human being should not be put into definitions, because s/he can never be treated as an object, as definitions tend to do.

I ignored as well a very long discussion about real existence of the world which is assumed by Aristotle and by the author of the essay in order to hold the essential topic of the essay.

To summarise, I faced the problem which spreads from the Aristotle’s stance within the philosophy of language. I think that two people’s thoughts cannot be identical, but they

indeed have something in common. I got through some examples which could call into question the whole Aristotle's vision. The most important remark was that thoughts do not have to refer to any actual, existing objects as Aristotle seems to assert. Thoughts present some possible pictures which are true or false by virtue of the real facts.