

1. Aristotle

Introduction

Aristotle in his essay has talked about the nature of reality and the nature of our perceptions, i.e., our understanding of this reality, that stems from reality itself. He has also talked about language (“spoken sounds” and “written marks”) which helps us express these affections. Through this essay, I will analyse the meanings of the different terminologies in the quote, and deconstruct Aristotle’s argument. I have divided my essay into four portions: Reality (Metaphysics), Perception (Epistemology) and Language (Subjective expressions) and Art (as a Universal Language). In each portion I will try to understand Aristotle’s argument falling under that category and offer my interpretation and agreement/disagreement with the same.

Reality: the “actual things”

In the Renaissance painting *The School of Athens*, there is a person (presumably Plato) who is seen pointing upwards to the heavens juxtaposed with another (presumably Aristotle) who humbly points downwards. This distinction typifies the two contrarian viewpoints around which stems a huge chunk of modern philosophy: Idealism and Realism.

Idealists uphold the primacy of consciousness which says that consciousness precedes existence of objects. In the words of the famous Idealist Bishop George Berkeley, “Esse est percipi” or “to be is to be perceived”. Without our perception of the world, the reality is immaterial and therefore not worth considering. Does this mean when I cannot perceive an object (perhaps I’ve closed my eyes) that it ceases to exist? They might argue that all things are always existent in the consciousness of God so they are always being perceived by *someone*, if not by us personally. Thus, they generally say there is something more to objects than their mere existence, something *transcendental*.

On the other hand, a realist in Aristotelian tradition will uphold the primacy of existence according to which existence precedes consciousness, that is, existence exists. Nothing has

“brought” these objects and our world into existence; they exist *ex cathedra*. It therefore states that there is an underlying objective reality beneath all our perceptions and that our percepts do not shape or affect this reality in any way. Thus, they say that there is nothing more to these objects than their mere existence.

Here I will say I am opposed to the extreme Idealists for the reason that there is no reason to believe otherwise. For example, when a Platonist argues that the wall in front of me actually possesses a quality of wall-ness which is characteristic of a perfect wall that exists in a supernatural “ideal of forms”, I have no reason to believe in the existence of such a domain. Granted, it is a possibility that this might be the case, but just because I cannot disprove it doesn’t mean it is true (In fact such a line of faulty reasoning leads to an entire slippery slope of wild possibilities, one of the most well known among which is the idea that a teapot is revolving around the earth right now because I cannot disprove this idea). A realist explanation of the world on the other hand is very close to what I actually see and sense, that the wall exists in front of me and that is all there is to it. I understand that Cartesian skepticism may be applied to my line of reasoning, but I am satisfied in just being confident in my assumptions, if not sure (which indeed is impossible as Descartes tells us). Therefore, I agree with him on that actual things are the same for everyone.

Perception: “affections of the soul”

I will try my best to understand correctly what Aristotle might be meaning by “affections” and “soul”. He says about affections that they are the “likenesses of actual things”. This means they are something that is derived from the actual things in the world, and not the real things themselves. Also, that these are based in reality and not just figments of our imagination. The concept that appears to follow through on both these grounds is that of perception, since it is also derived from reality but is not the reality itself. But “affections” might also mean thoughts because thoughts are end results of a process of ‘thinking’ that works on these perceptions and results in a thought. But I will not take this meaning of “affections” because perceptions and not thoughts are “likeness” of the actual things and thoughts stem from these likenesses. Since these affections are supposed to be “in the soul”, and they nearly mean our perceptions which are based in the mind of the person, I take it Aristotle means by soul the mind.

In the quote Aristotle says that these so called affections of the soul are the same for every person. Consider here the example of the blind man and the elephant. When a blind man touches the tail of the unknown object, that is the elephant, he thinks it is a snake hanging down; when he touches the trunk, he thinks the object is something else entirely. Therefore, since we don’t perceive things the same way, how can these affections be the same for us?

But do we really perceive things all that differently? Are we all blind men and is our world an elephant?

It is useful to mention here that the German philosopher Immanuel Kant offered his own metaphysics which divides our world into two parts: the *noumena* or the objective reality of the world, and the *phenomena* which is the world that we perceive. He says that although such a *noumena* does exist, the job of our faculties of perceptions is to come close to realising this reality because absolute understanding is impossible, given the differences arising out of our senses. Therefore, the table I see in front of me cannot be all that different when you see it. Of course if we view things from radically different point of views, you from the top and I from the side, the shape of the table will be very different. But in everyday life, this is not really the case because we might have viewed that table from many different perspectives and have thus drawn an image of the table in our heads which is nearly the same. If this were not the case, the world couldn't function. If people really did see things differently, there would be chaos—since there would be absolutely no consensus at all. I understand that sometimes there are such great disparities in our perceptions, for example, when a colourblind person sees brown and a normal person sees brown. But these are exceptions that prove the rule rather than disprove it, because they tell us that something needs to be lacking in you for there to be such differences in perception, and as a corollary we might say if you're fairly the same as other people in general, your perceptions would also generally be the same.

Thus, even though my view of something may be exactly identical to somebody else's, but for all practical purposes it would be the same and assuming otherwise by harping on minute differences would be very impractical. Here, therefore, I agree with Aristotle somewhat in that that affections of the soul are similar for every man, but not exactly the same. I stress again that I understand that radical skepticism can be applied here, but it should be used only to doubt my observations, not discredit them.

Language

For Aristotle, "spoken sounds" were symbols or representations of our affections/perceptions in the soul/mind. But how do we decide what particular sounds/words to use to describe something? And the answer to this is cognition. Cognition is man's faculty of thinking which helps him to work on his perceptions and frame his thoughts. Like we have stated earlier, this mental process can be understood as a reaction's equation with perceptions (reactants) on one side and thoughts (products) on the other end. And just like the same reactants sometimes lead to different products in different circumstances, similarly, our faculty of cognition (in layman terms, the way we think) lead to different conclusions/thoughts from the same percepts.

This accounts for the different ways people describe the same things. For example, people might refer to as an orange coloured circle on a piece of paper as the sun, or an orange or simply an orange circle. But even though their words are different, the referent, i.e., the orange circle, is the same. This is what Aristotle is trying to say when he writes that the “spoken sounds” are not the same for everyone but the underlying “affections of the soul” definitely are.

According to Aristotle, it is these “spoken sounds” that give rise to “written marks” which he understands to be the symbol of these spoken sounds. This makes sense historically, because the development of a verbal form of communication preceded that of a written form of communication by several thousand years, and that writing was primarily a tool to record things and therefore communication through writing was not as immediate as verbal communication. Since writing is just a symbol of speech, and the meaning of spoken sounds/words is different for different people, similarly, the same written word is also different for different people.

The Aristotelian definition of language would then be as a code of certain visual-auditory symbols carrying certain meaning. And this meaning is so deeply embedded in these words that it is impossible to study words in themselves and separate them from their usage and meaning. The use of the words gives them meaning and they as such do not carry meaning at all. This was what Wittgenstein was arguing when he talked about the “language games” we play, wherein we try to understand the sense in which the speaker/writer was intending the word to be used. And the credit for deciding what word to use where and in what sense goes to our process of cognition (like we have established earlier in the essay), which is something unique to us.

So in our everyday life, the cause of a lot of turmoil and disturbances is often attributed to the fact that we were misunderstood. Is there then a way, a form of language, that is universal, that is, it carries a universal appeal by virtue of being what it is? And the answer to this is: art.

Art: A Universal Language

Although the discussion of art and its universality may appear to be beyond the scope of the quote, it is crucial for us (1) to discuss whether a form of language (that necessitates a correct interpretation) really ever is possible, and also (2) to explain exactly what quality of words (spoken/written) enables us to understand them the way the writer/speaker was intending. Because if it is shown that no form of language can ever accurately convey the person’s true intentions, then the conclusion that there is a common “affection of the soul”

lying underneath language, is called into question, since we would have no observational proof of such a common “affection of the soul” ever lying underneath language.

This question is resolved by an examination of the various forms of art. We will take two examples: one of art as “spoken sound” and the other of art as “written marks”. Musical singing is an art form that is very crudely just “spoken sound” but it has a universal appeal. For example, the opera narrating the heart-wrenching tale of Don Giovanni would evoke emotions of loss and despair (i.e., the intended meaning of this opera) in all people hearing it (provided they are open to the reception of such emotions/meaning). Similarly when somebody reads the poem *Auguries of Innocence* by William Blake, and attempts to really understand it, it will evoke in everyone the same feeling of temporality and impermanence.

This universal understanding/appeal of art is what makes us term it as a universal language. And this is the proof of a common “affection of the soul” underlying the different words/sounds we use to express ourselves. The answer then to the questions posed above is simple: (1) yes, there is such a form of language that necessitates the correct interpretation of the creator’s meaning by virtue of being what it is; and (2) the quality of words (spoken/written) that enables us to understand what the speaker/writer was intending to communicate is the certain *aesthetic quality* (the skill of a great writer, or a wonderful orator).

Conclusion

In my essay I have explained the meaning of different terms used by Aristotle in his quote. I agree with him on the fact that there are “actual things”. I agree partially with him when he says that “affections of soul” are the same for everyone, because I establish that these affections (which are actually perceptions) are similar but not same for everyone. Also I agree with him when he writes that language in the form of “spoken sounds” and “written marks” is different for different people (as was also shown by Wittgenstein) and that in our normal everyday conversations/writings this underlying common-ness is masked. But in a specialised form of expression using words and sounds, i.e., art, this common “affection of the soul” is brought out. It was crucial to mention art here because if we had no such form of language where this common-ness was brought out, we would have no reason to believe that there is a common underlying “affection of the soul” beneath “spoken sounds” and “Written marks”.