

1. *“Spoken sounds are symbols of affection in the soul, and written marks symbols of spoken sounds. And just as written marks are not the same for all men, neither are spoken sounds. But what these are in the first place signs of - affections of the soul – are the same for all; and what these affections are likeness of – actual things – are also the same” ~Aristotle, De Interpretatione, 16 a2*

Through the Mirror of the Mind

The Quote

Aristotle, known as the last and most empirical of our three Athenian fathers of philosophy, gives us in this quote one of the possible answers to a question older than the word epistemology itself; whether objective truth exists or not. First of all I want to say that the language Aristotle uses in this quote actually quite bothers me. By talking about ‘affections in the soul’ he smooths out the road for misinterpretation, namely what he means with this poetic use of words.

But like I said this quote isn’t about this poetic language. Aristotle talks in this quote about something that reminds me of Kant’s reason in some ways. He believes that every human being interprets the same reality and that these interpretations are equal to our thoughts (affections in the soul, as it is only a thought which can truly affect a soul). Problem only arises through the meaning of language, as communication often leads to misinterpretations (which was ironically almost the case with this quote like I stated earlier) like Wittgenstein already explained.

So Aristotle is basically saying that because we’re all human beings and all interpret the same reality our thoughts must be the same, but that every form of misunderstanding could be derived from faults in our communication. Although misinterpretation and misunderstanding are two concepts which have an obvious correlation I hope to explain to you later on in this essay why this (quite radical) assumption is in reality false, in my opinion.

Furthermore Aristotle seems to have a very strange perception of the written language. He quite literally creates a hierarchy of communication in general in this quote as he states that

written language is always distracted from the spoken language ('and written marks symbols of spoken sounds'). This way we actually get a really good and clear image of how Aristotle sees the process of thought and communication:

Reality (outside world) -> Thoughts -> Spoken language -> Written language
(Will be furtherly discussed later on).

But before I start with the theorethical analysis and commentary on this quote, let's read a story.

Story: 'The Monstruous Meal'

"A girl was sitting close to a window

The sun shone outside and the light bleached the mirror in front of her

Then all of a sudden something appeared in the glass of the window

First a trunk, which was moving at a speed that could have easily killed the girl, could be seen

Thereafter followed a head, characterised by two giant ears

And at last the elephant stood in her room

While she was quite surprised with the fact that an elephant was standing in the room

She realised that the elephant was screaming, in a language she could understand

'Help me', trumpeted the poor animal, 'help me there's a monstruous being behind me

It may seem small, but its small teeth are sharper than they look

And if you won't pay attention it will crawl into your nose and kill you from the inside

The girl looked scared to the window, while the elephant ran away through a wall

The girl's cat, which had heard the conversation, jumped in the window

The girl tried to scream

Tried to warn her cat for the monster inside

But all of a sudden the cat returned

With a mouse in his mouth."

This story is one I've just written for this occasion, so sorry for its lack of a poetic or lyric form. I would like to simplify or, better put, clarify my theoretical dissertation with the help of this story, which I will refer to throughout my explanation.

I've chosen to work like this as an homage to Plato, because of the way he's able to beautifully explain his theories to the people with the help of stories, like the allegory of the cave explains how he sees knowledge. This works better than a regular theoretical explanation, because people tend to remember stories better than theories. And because people see art as a form of entertainment those stories can live on for centuries, while they keep exclaiming their philosophy. Just look at how *the Matrix*, one of my favorite movies, beautifully seems to bring Plato's allegory back to the public, disguised as a Sci-Fi movie. And of course because the essay becomes more fun that way. And who doesn't love some fun?

Commentary on the quote

The Outer World

Aristotle seems to assume that we all see the same reality in the same way ('But what these are in the first place signs of are the same for all'), although this is a logical assumption it turns out to be too idealistic in reality. Because when we look to the outside world we never look with objective eyes, like Aristotle would assume us to do, we look with our own eyes.

Plato called it *δοξαι*, Nietzsche called it the subjective truths of society and we tend to call it dogmas, but in essence they're all the same. A dogma is a subjective truth or ideology which is (mostly) a common conception in society. Formulated differently, it's something that is believed by most members of a society or group in general, without giving it a second thought. Although philosophers try to fight these dogmas and try to think loose from these (mostly wrong) assumptions, we must yield that thinking without dogmas is a wonderful but impossible ideal (like most ideals). You can't fight against the thinking patterns you've learned since you were a child, and even if this would be possible you would probably just create new ones to colour the world around us. That's why I don't use the word dogma, but prefer the word *Fenestra*, as they can be seen as the windows through which we look at reality.

If a communist looks at a McDonalds he doesn't see the same thing as a capitalist, if you would let him look at the same restaurant. Aristotle or Kant would probably argue that if they would think loose from their opinions the two men would give the same definition, but I'm quite frankly sure that as a result of their *Fenestrae* the two will never agree on this or almost everything else as well. Nobody is the same, just as nobody has exactly the same interpretations.

In this story when the elephant looks at the mouse he sees something else than when the cat looks at the same mouse. The elephant is blinded by his *Fenestrae* and believes the mouse to be a monster, but so is the cat who only sees the mouse as his next meal.

The Birth of a Thought

These interpretations lead us to create thoughts about the world around us. This way we, to put it metaphorically, start to upload the world around us in the form of abstract thoughts. You could see this as an individual 'Platonic world of Ideas', as the system by which we create our thoughts is mostly the same as the way Plato describes his Ideas, but on a very individualistic level. This leads to a lot of subjectivity and is the womb from which for example nihilism is born.

But a thought does not only exist of interpretations, as those tend to get mixed up with our emotions inside our head, you could compare this to denotation and connotation in the philosophy of Derrida. The interpretations form the denotation of a Thought, while our emotions fill these 'objective' definitions with ever changing opinions and feelings about the Thought, its connotation.

Not only does the elephant have different opinions about the mouse than the cat because of his *Fenestrae*, but also will he link other feelings to the sight of this mouse. Like clearly stated in the story is the elephant scared to death, his fear colours his already quite subjective Thought about the mouse, while the cat is filled with happiness and excitement, as he associates the mouse with food.

Communication

When you have these Thoughts you can, with the help of your ratio, start to think. But of course we want to share our Thoughts with the outside world, specifically other humans. The method we use to accomplish this wish is communication.

To formulate it quite simply, we can see communication as a settled empirical code between individuals used to interchange Thoughts with each other. But of course this too has a lot of flaws, as every word is linked to a Thought inside your head and, like I explained earlier, these Thoughts always tend to be different from individual to individual. So communication is a way to try and express our Thoughts, but because it too consists and thrives because of Thoughts communication itself needs explanation as well, which would lead to an eternal cycle without ending.

But I must say that most of the time these differences aren't as radical as I have till now presented them to be. Communication is a pretty reliable form of interchanging ideas, its true problems almost only arise in deep conversations or when we try to define something (or like I would say give a Thought's denotation).

This too we can see very clearly in the story. Because the elephant defines and characterizes the mouses according to his own subjective Thoughts it seems to us (or the girl) that he describes some sort of demon. But later on we see that he was actually describing the mouse (of course is this story tremendously simplified and is this principle far more complicated in

reality). The cat, ironically, understands the elephant immediately, although having an opposite thought as the elephant, and eats the mouse. This is why in some way you could the story a satire of our own reality, because the opposite is normally the case for humans.

‘Smell ya later’

Aristotle also gave us a clear hierarchy between the written and spoken language, but is this really the case? In classical (and in a lot of modern) philosophy dominates the idea that only two senses are fitted for communication: sight and hearing. And these two manifest themselves likewise in the forms of the written and spoken language.

But as you maybe had already noticed is this not the case in my definition of communication. I’m a firm believer that every sense can be used as a way to communicate with each other. Not only ‘can they be used’, but pretty much every sense is used in forms of communication. Braille is for example for blind what the written language is for they who can normally see. And a lot of insects literally talk to each other with the use of smell. They, for example, warn their ‘friends’ by releasing a specific smell, which can be seen as a fixed code for danger.

But still I haven’t denounced the fact that speech seems to be the dominant form of communication. Which it is, but this does not mean that the written world is a form of communication that is derived from the spoken language.

The spoken language is by far the easiest form of communication for human beings, and it’s simply impressive how incredibly functional we have evolved to use this oh-so-human skill. The movements we make in the process of creating speech seem to be so fluid that one would believe that we were born to speak, but reality learns us that every baby first needs to learn this amazing ability, and only later on will he be confronted with the written language (in the form of feeling or sight). But I believe that this process could be different. I believe that there could be some sort of Platonic cave in which live people who’s primal form of communication is for example writing. This would be harder, because you would always need something to write on, but I believe that this could be possible.

The only reason why the spoken language seems to be the written language’s master is because of its efficiency, not because it is the only possible primal form of communication. From which we can conclude that Aristotle speaks through a *Fenestrae* of someone born in a world of speech.

By the way, the title of this part is named after a catchphrase from the television series *Pokémon*, so I just want to clarify that I do know that ‘ya’ isn’t the correct spelling of the word (just playing safely).

Conclusion

We can conclude that although Aristotle has some very logical assumptions which he uses in his quote, the quote itself isn't true at all. The first problem is the objectivity which he attributes to the denotation of words, which in fact are always bathed in a pool of subjectivity. And the second big problem is the hierarchy he creates between the written and spoken language which on itself is the result of Aristotle's own *Fenestrae*.

So let's all try to be a little bit more like the cat and remember that all Thoughts are always subjective, in one way or another.