

1. *"Images belong to the rational soul in the manner of perceptions, and whenever it affirms or denies that something is good or bad, it pursues or avoids. Consequently, the soul never thinks without an image."*

Aristotle, *De Anima*

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## 1. Introduction

In his quote from *"De Anima"* (III, 7, 431a, 14-17), the Ancient philosopher Aristotle claims that images that belong to the "rational soul" exist in the "manner of perceptions". My interpretation of this statement is that these so called "images" are our concepts, thoughts and ideas, and that Aristotle is indicating that they're derived from our perceptions. According to Aristotle, "the soul never thinks without an image", which, logically, would indicate that our thoughts are always based on images, which, in turn are essentially based on perceptions. Therefore, thinking about something that cannot be perceived seems impossible. Aristotle also makes an ethical statement upon claiming that people judge these images, figuring out whether they're something good or bad, and then act accordingly. In this essay I am first going to go through the concepts used in Aristotle's quote, taking into account Aristotle's own philosophical views and assumptions. I am then going to concentrate on the ethical assumptions in Aristotle's quote. In the third part of this essay I am going to present three arguments opposing Aristotle's views on epistemology, knowledge on nonexistent individuals and naturalistic ethics, and finally, conclude.

## 2. About Aristotle's concepts in the light of his philosophical views

I am going to begin by going through the concepts and terms used in Aristotle's quote, pursuing to elaborate both them and their meanings by taking a look at the historical background of Aristotle's citation, since insofar as I am concerned the historical context of the terms used is crucial in understanding what Aristotle really meant by them and how they should be interpreted. This will also let us be more favourable when giving arguments against Aristotle's ideas.

In his quote Aristotle talks about "images", which, according to him, belong to the rational soul "in the manner of perceptions". Insofar as I am concerned, these "images" are the ideas, concepts and thoughts that we have, ranging from very basic concepts such as "a dog" and "a table" to more complex terms, such as "causation" and "justice". To me, Aristotle's choice of words would indicate that these ideas, concepts and thoughts are actual, concrete images that pop into our heads as our thought process goes on – that is, when we think about a dog jumping on the table we can truly see the sight of that action taking place in our minds. However, the idea of having images of more complex terms, such as the aforementioned "causation" and "justice" seems problematic, and we are going to get back to that later

on in this essay. Moreover, upon claiming that “the soul never thinks without an image” Aristotle seems to think that it is impossible to have thought processes without these images, which are derived from perceptions. Thus it doesn’t seem possible to have images – and, consequently, thoughts – about things one has never perceived before. This claim raises objections in the minds of many, and we will get back to these objections once we go through the arguments opposed to Aristotle’s quote.

According to Aristotle, these “images” are, essentially, derived from perceptions – that is, the information that our senses, especially our sight, give us about the world around us. Thus, the concept of “a dog” would initially have been formed by the perception of various dogs. However, it doesn’t really matter whether this “image of a dog” is a Dalmatian, a Pug or a Poodle, and this can be elaborated by looking at how Aristotle himself made a distinction between “essential” and “contingent” properties of beings. A dog doesn’t necessarily have to have dots, like Dalmatians do, and it doesn’t necessarily have to have a wrinkly face, like Pugs do, as we can easily imagine a dog that doesn’t have a single dot on its fur or a wrinkly face. Thus, these properties are purely contingent when we form our concept of “a dog”, and they do not necessarily have to be that way. However, the aforementioned properties are essential for a Dalmatian to be Dalmatian and a Pug to be called a Pug, since those are the properties commonly associated with the said breeds. This leaves us to ponder what exactly makes a dog *dog*. Does it have to have four legs and fur on it? Does it have to bark? We can easily imagine a dog with only one leg and no fur, and it is obvious that not every dog barks, which leaves us with the question about what the “image” of a dog actually consists of. According to Aristotle, every being has an essence that makes it *it*, but it is not so easy to distinguish these essential properties from the contingent ones. Maybe we form the concept of a dog by putting together what most of the dogs we have seen have had in common. A dog might have lost its leg, but since it shares most of its properties with other dogs we’ve seen we still classify it as a dog.

Upon claiming that “images belong in the rational soul in the manner of perceptions” Aristotle seems to take the standpoint of an empiricist – that is, a philosophical school of thought which claims that all knowledge is obtained through our sense in the form of perceptions. Even though the most famous empiricists lived in the 17th century, such as the British philosopher John Locke, judging by the quote it seems like Aristotle supported at least a certain form of empiricism already in the Ancient times. This can be conceptualised by using Locke’s concept of “*tabula rasa*”, a blank slate. According to Locke, a newborn human’s mind is a blank slate with no initial knowledge of the world. The baby then forms concepts, thoughts and ideas as she begins to perceive the world around her, not by having some “innate knowledge”, which is what many philosophers have claimed from Plato’s “ideas” to Rene Descartes’ “rational reality”. However, as opposed to some modern empiricists, Aristotle doesn’t neglect the role of rationality altogether, as he specifically highlights that “images belong to the *rational soul*”. This concept can, once again, be elaborated by taking a look at Aristotle’s idea about “essential properties”: according to Aristotle, humans are essentially rational beings, since that is what distinguishes them from other animals. Humans have the capability to give reasons for their actions, plan their future and have abstract concepts such as “right” and “wrong”, which, according to Aristotle, is what makes a human *human*. As far as I am concerned, by combining images which derive from perception with the idea of “a rational soul” Aristotle pursues to emphasise how , humans have the

means to process, conceptualise and categorise their perceptions, as well as logically analyse them. Thus, instead of being mere passive perceivers of the world humans actively process their perceptions while forming ideas about them. However, it should be noted that by using the word “soul” Aristotle most likely isn’t referring to what many Western people associate “soul” with – that is, a mental substance that’s somehow different from our material bodies -, since that idea was first introduced by Rene Descartes and his Cartesian, dualist philosophy. In Ancient Greece, on the other hand, most philosophers didn’t give much thought to the relationship between the mind and the body, and therefore I think that by “soul” Aristotle merely refers to our consciousness and thought processes without making a metaphysical assumption about two, separate substances that from a human being.

### **3. About Aristotle’s ethical assumptions**

Aristotle’s quote does not, however, only concern epistemology, since it also has ethical assumptions. In his quote Aristotle claims that it is up to the “rational soul” to affirm something as good or bad, and once the soul has done that it will, consequently, either “pursue it” or “avoid it”. This claim is in accordance with both Aristotle’s normative and meta-ethical view, and I am going to begin with the normative interpretation. Aristotle was a supporter of so called “virtue ethics”, which is a philosophical school of thought that claims that in order to live a happy life – or, in Aristotle’s own terms, reach “*eudaimonia*” - people are supposed to practice virtues and avoid vice. This thought is based on the idea of humans as essentially rational beings, since animals cannot make judgements about things as bad or good, for they lack both the concepts and cognitive means to do so. In order to become “virtuous” one must practice these virtues daily, so that at the end these virtues come automatically, and I think that this is what Aristotle means by claiming that the soul pursues what it affirms as “good” and, consequently, avoids what it deems “bad”. When a person has become virtuous, defining something as “bad” automatically leads her to avoid doing such a thing, whereas upon affirming something as “good” the person automatically pursues to practice it.

Upon mentioning images that are derived from perceptions and seeing something as “good” or “bad” Aristotle seems to hold the meta-ethical assumption that we’re capable of making ethical judgements based on our perceptions of the world. When we have a perception of something – say, a criminal robbing an old woman -, we either deem it good or view it as morally condemnable, and once we have come up with either of the judgements we either avoid doing such a thing ourselves –or even try to prevent it, if that is what’s seen as virtuous behaviour -, or, on the contrary, pursue to practice it. Aristotle was a meta-ethical naturalist, which means that he thought that what is good and what is bad can be defined by natural properties, such as pleasure, happiness or life that is in accordance with the human essence. By saying that we essentially affirm *perceptions* as condemnable or something to pursue Aristotle seems to indicate that morality and what is good or bad is based on what we perceive, which is in accordance with his meta-ethical views. As opposed to Immanuel Kant, a 18<sup>th</sup> century enlightenment philosopher, who thought that what is right and what is wrong can only be based on reason, Aristotle held the view that morality can be derived from our essential properties, and we can obtain this knowledge by perceiving the world. By looking at human beings and how they behave we can notice some essential properties that are only characteristics of human beings, such as rationality, and

ethics should be based on this information. Therefore, morality is essentially derived from our perceptions, which form our images and thoughts.

#### **4. Opposing Aristotle's views**

As we concluded in the previous chapter, Aristotle's philosophical views and standpoints reflect the philosophical assumptions and thoughts typical of the Ancient Greece. However, taking the context into account doesn't mean that Aristotle's quote is immune to criticism, and in this chapter I am going to go through possible objections raised against Aristotle's views. First of all, I am going to consider his empiricism and the problems associated with it. Secondly, I wish to shed light on Aristotle's claim about "the soul never thinking without an image", the problems it brings and how they can be overcome. Lastly, I am going to get back to the ethical assumptions in Aristotle's quote, seeking to criticise them.

First of all, as we already noticed, Aristotle claims that the images of the rational soul, which are used in our thought processes, belong to the soul "in the manner of perceptions". I have already gone through how this statement seems to support empiricism, but it is yet to be analysed whether empiricism is a philosophically sustainable way of viewing knowledge and epistemology in general. On the surface the idea that our concepts, thoughts and ideas are derived from perceptions seems reasonable: after all, the fact that I am familiar with the concept of "a dog" and "a table" doesn't seem to have another realistic source. Plato, obviously, thought otherwise, claiming that every individual being is a part of an "eternal idea", and true knowledge is always directed at these ideas, not the individual beings we perceive in our everyday life. However, Plato's objective idealism has various problems, and modern philosophy has, at least to certain extent, neglected Plato's idea of a coexisting, eternal entity of ideas. Having concepts, ideas and thoughts that are based on our perceptions seems far more reasonable than deriving them from a non-materialistic entity, and this view can be supported using the concept of Ockham's razor, which claims that each theory should be as simple as possible, encouraging us to get rid of entities the properties of which could be reduced to other entities.

Empiricism does not, however, come without problems either. The first objection to empiricism has to do with abstract concepts, which I already touched upon earlier. John Locke himself pondered about the problem of a "general triangle" and the challenge it posed to empiricism. The problem goes as follows: it seems clear that we have the concept of a triangle. The world around us has plenty of triangle-shaped things, but it seems like none of these things is *identical* to the concept of a "general triangle" that we have. This is because the concept of a general triangle can be applied to triangles that are isosceles, equilateral, neatly drawn or imprecise, and it seems obvious that there isn't a single perceivable triangle that would have all these properties, for they contradict each other – a triangle for sure cannot be both isosceles and equilateral at the same time! Thus, it seems like empiricism cannot give explanations for why we have these abstract concepts.

Another objection to empiricism in the context of Aristotle's quote lies within empiricism itself. David Hume, a famous modern empiricist, took empiricism up another notch and claimed that if we are to stay true to the principles of empiricism we'll have to admit that concepts such as "causation" aren't actually

derived from perceptions rather than habit. When we see a red ball hitting a blue ball, resulting in the blue ball moving, all we really perceive is a chain of events, nothing more, nothing less. Saying that the red ball *caused* the blue ball to move is already adding to the perception, since we cannot perceive causation taking place. In the context of Aristotle's quote this would mean that having a concept of "causation" is impossible, since we cannot perceive it. If images truly are to belong to the rational soul in the manner of perceptions, the concept we have should not be called causation in the first place – it should merely be called "a ball hitting another ball, and it follows that the hit ball starts to move".

Secondly, I am going to concentrate on the part of Aristotle's quote where he claims that "the soul never thinks without images". As, according to Aristotle, these images exist in our "rational souls" as perceptions, it seems reasonable to me to interpret that our thoughts always have their basis in perceptions – meaning that if we haven't or cannot perceive something we also cannot think about it. This assumption was very common in the Ancient Greece, where many philosophers, such as Parmenides, held the view that a thought has to always be derived from something that *actually* exists, for how could we know anything about it if it didn't exist and, therefore, be perceivable? This viewpoint raised many problems and, in Parmenides' case, led to rather absurd conclusions, as he arrived at the conclusion that a sentence such as "This isn't a table" couldn't possibly have a meaning, since he has never perceived this so-called "non-table". Given this, Parmenides pondered about the paradox of thinking about beings that do not actually exist and cannot therefore be perceived, such as Pegasus or Zeus. Aristotle's quote seems to have the same underlying assumption and, consequently, the same problems, which I am now going to go through.

Let us take a look at logic first and foremost. The 20<sup>th</sup> century philosopher Bertrand Russell logically solved the problems of inexistent objects by using his principle of "definite descriptions". According to Russell, words such as Pegasus or Donald Trump are "hidden definite descriptions", and they can both be broken down into descriptions such as "the horse with wings in Ancient mythology" or "the current president of the USA". When looking at sentences such as "Pegasus doesn't exist", which in Aristotle's philosophy would be an impossible statement, given that Pegasus must be derived from perceptions in order to create a concept, and since it doesn't exist it cannot be perceived, Russell's theory seems to solve the problem. According to him, the description "the horse with wings in Ancient mythology" can be presented as "there is exactly one x that is a horse with wings in Ancient mythology", and, consequently, we can say that "it is not the case that there is exactly one x that is the horse with wings in Ancient mythology". Russell's theory helps us to escape the obvious contradiction in Aristotle's view, but it doesn't yet explain *how* concepts of inexistent objects are formed, if not by perceptions.

In order to dig deeper into the problem, I would like to note that Aristotle's view actually resembles the 20<sup>th</sup> century philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein's initial philosophy of language, and even though these philosophers lived in very different ages and countries I still find bringing him up relevant in the context of this quote as a fascinating analogy to Aristotle's views on inexistent objects. In his early years of philosophy Wittgenstein was a supporter of a so-called "picture theory of language", which claimed that our words and sentences cause different types of images or pictures to pop into our heads. This resembles Aristotle's quote in a rather interesting manner, as Aristotle himself claimed that our rational

souls use images in thought processes. According to Wittgenstein, we use these words and sentences to refer to the “true states of the world”, which would make the talk of both inexistent objects, such as Pegasus, and things that aren’t perceivable in the world in general, such as moral claims, meaningless. Aristotle’s quote seems to be in accordance with the first part of Wittgenstein’s conclusion, since inexistent objects sure aren’t perceivable and our souls cannot, therefore, have any images of them. Interestingly enough, Aristotle doesn’t seem to agree with Wittgenstein on his second claim, since, as we concluded upon taking a look at Aristotle’s ethical views, Aristotle does in fact seem to believe that it is possible for us to deem what is good or bad based on these perceptions. This paradox will be discussed to greater extent later on, as we take a look at possible objections against Aristotle’s ethical assumptions seen in the quote.

However, Wittgenstein himself later noticed that this theory had major flaws, and these problems can be applied to Aristotle’s quote as well. Rather than referring to “the states of the world”, words seem to get their meaning in *how we use them* in certain contexts. When we apply this realisation to Aristotle’s quote we might realise that our concepts and ideas are not necessarily derived from perceptions - they can, for example, be social, collectively owned concepts of Gods, such as Zeus, or fictional characters, such as Harry Potter. These types of words could, in fact, be best conceptualised using the philosopher Gottlob Frege’s distinction between the “sense” and the “reference” of words: there are words that have both a sense and a reference, such as “Donald Trump” and “the current president of the USA”, but there are also words that only have a sense and lack a reference, such as Santa Claus. Therefore, in order to think about the adventures of Harry Potter the concept itself doesn’t have to refer to anything that actually exists, which would indicate that not all of our concepts are derived from perceptions. It is possible that there is an intersubjective reality that consists of our knowledge on culture and traditions, like the philosopher Karl Popper proposed in his theory of three worlds, a physical, mental and cultural one. The concept of “Zeus” doesn’t, thus, have to have its basis on a perceivable figure rather than the way we use the word in relation to other humans, in various contexts.

Finally, I would like to take a critical stance on the ethical assumptions presented in Aristotle’s quote. As we noticed earlier, Aristotle seems to think that objects and concepts that cannot be perceived cannot be thought, whereas ethical judgements can be based on perceptions. This seems contradictory to me, and this claim can be elaborated using the aforementioned philosopher David Hume’s principle of Hume’s guillotine. The principle is usually summarised in a simple sentence “*no ought from is*”, which basically means that the states of the world cannot be used to justify normative statements. As an example, according to Hume’s principle the fact that most people seem to seek heterosexual relationships doesn’t mean that it *should* be so. This raises obvious problems in Aristotle’s quote: we cannot base what is good and what is bad on what we perceive, because those attributes *cannot be perceived*.

My second objection that has to do with Aristotle’s ethical views concerns his claim that “*whenever it* (the rational soul) *affirms or denies that something is good or bad, it pursues or avoids*”. This claim is in accordance with the common Ancient view which claimed that when a person knows what is good or

bad, she also acts accordingly. Therefore, bad actions are a result of ignorance rather than bad intents. This view, however, doesn't seem to be realistic or even possible when we take a look at human psychology. Let us, as an example, imagine that "good" is defined with "pleasure" and "bad" with "pain". If people weren't as complex beings as they are, saying that people always seek pleasure and avoid pain would seem reasonable, if not even necessary. However, as the psychologist Freud pointed out, people do not act in such a simple manner, since, according to Freud, there's a so-called "beyond-pleasure" principle. Just like eating pizza for the rest of your life would eventually make you sick of the food, maximising pleasure and always acting morally would eventually bore you. Sometimes people seek pain and do bad actions deliberately, even if they themselves deemed them immoral or condemnable. The philosopher Žižek conceptualises this using an example from an Italian movie, where a man only likes sleeping with women that are married, even though he deems it wrong. When this man finally finds a woman he falls in love with and wants to marry, this woman asks the priest for permission to have sex with the man before their wedding. This ruins everything, since the man only enjoys sex provided that it had the aspect of immorality to it. The human psychology works in various ways, and simplifying it to pursuing what is deemed good and avoiding what is seen as bad doesn't therefore seem reasonable.

## **5. Conclusion**

In this essay I have gone through the concepts Aristotle used in his quote, looking at them from the perspective of both his own philosophical ideas and the common assumptions of his time. I have then concentrated on the ethical views presented in Aristotle's quote, and finally presented arguments opposed to Aristotle's quote, starting with objections to his empiricism, then moving onto the problem of nonexistent objects Aristotle's quote inevitably raises and finally, finishing with reflections on Aristotle's ethical views using both the principle of Hume's guillotine and Freud's ideas on human psychology. In conclusion, this quote by Aristotle resembles various philosophical assumptions common to his time, and looking at them from a modern perspective can help to reveal their inner contradictions and problems.