Aristotle's Perception of Poetry

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Aristotle's Perception of Poetry as Compared to History

Aristotle was an eminent philosopher whose contribution to the discipline over the decades has been profoundly appreciated. Aristotle whose work reflected numerous traits in Plato's work, his mentor, later delved deeper into Platonic philosophy. Although he learned a lot from Plato it did not necessarily imply that Aristotle agreed with his mentor on every aspect. Aristotle was known for making comparisons between poetry and history on various occasions affirming that poetry was more philosophical compared to history. Poetry had a deeper meaning to the philosopher than how the world viewed it. Aristotle was convinced that poetry would be the answer to many phenomena and theories. The philosopher perceived history to be inferior to poetry which was contrary to what the majority of people upheld. Many decades later, the topic still sparks a serious debate amongst scholars who still try to discern the most philosophical discipline between the two. The juxtaposition of poetry and history by Aristotle has further created a drift between historians and poets as each side criticize one another. Additionally, Aristotle held different opinions regarding art and epidemiology from his teacher of 20 years Plato. Plato was of the idea that art was not real and thus is incapable of imparting knowledge. However, Aristotle's intentions were never to create a rift between the two fields but rather aimed at elucidating poetry more. Aristotle's views on history were wrongly perceived to be antagonistic.

According to Aristotle, poetry is "more philosophical and better" than history. The infamous comparison of poetry to history has been viewed as offensive by modern historians. Aristotle's assertion has been widely dismissed by modern historians the likes of de Ste. Croix who claimed that the remarks were an inconsistent application of his own beliefs (Oliveira & De Abreu, 2015). Other historians believe that Aristotle's assumption reflected a rather "deplorable blindness to histography" (Frank, 1989). It is undeniable that Aristotle's credence spurred a lot of reactions amongst various individuals with many being of the contrary opinion to him. Aristotle regrettably stated that he never meant for the words to his last thoughts on history which begs the question, what were his last thoughts on the matter? Unfortunately, no one is in a position to avail the answers to the previous question. Undeniably, Aristotle's sentiments caused an antagonistic relationship between the genres of poetry and history (Dorter, 1973). The real discussion, however, lies on whether there was compelling evidence to support Aristotle's claims

or was it all just a reflection of “a dearth of archive material or a sense of timelessness” as attested by historians Collingwood and Finley.

Aristotle anticipated such reactions from critics and thus felt the need to explicate his views on the pertinent issue. According to Aristotle, poetry and history have varying functional properties. The previous deduction implies that history explains about past events while poetry talked about the probabilities of certain events happening in the future. Unlike the common fallacious belief, the difference is not based on the fictional or nonfictional aspects of the disciplines. As noticeable Aristotle’s choice of words were somewhat precise. Poetry is a more universal subject while history dwells on particular happenings over a period of time. Aristotle does not make a direct declaration that poetry is philosophy but instead adduce that “it is closer to philosophy than history” because of its universality (Oliveira & De Abreu, 2015). Aristotle elaborates that other past events occur due to probable causes which are subject to poetic representation. Aristotle illuminates that “whatever befell one or more people during a particular period of time, each of the events relating to the others by chance.” Another noticeable difference is that historians dwell on extensive research which involves the collection of facts and shreds of evidence regarding an event whereas the poet focuses on the factors causing the particular occurrences whether fictional or non-fictional. Hence, whether or not the events display explanatory coherences or not, it is the responsibility of a historian to report the incident.

The clause ‘poetry is more universal’ tends to explain the philosophical difference between the two fields of study. Philosophy is regarded to be the highest point in the forms of knowledge hierarchy and as such explains why the debate was perceived so personally. Poetry and history have been antagonistically placed (Dorter, 1973). It is, therefore, worth noting that the former revelation only works to further deviate from Aristotle’s expository on the matter. Aristotle’s intentions were never to malign history on making it seem more menial compared to poetry but to enunciate the philosophical differences. Thus the phrase ‘more philosophical’ was meant to imply “involving more understanding” (Frank, 1989). Aristotle broadly understood philosophy as the knowledge of the truth which did not necessarily include scientific knowledge but applicable skills. Knowledge and skills require a more universal perspective which is entailed in poetry. History relies on scientific and theoretical knowledge which according to Aristotle is not the definition of a philosophical study. One is required to comprehend Aristotle’s metaphysical structure to understand the philosophical superiority of poetry over history.

Plato has had a significant impact on western philosophy. Plato was known to have been Aristotle's teacher and thus by nature agreed on many issues. Nonetheless, the two philosophers' ideologies varied when Plato claimed that art was not knowledgeable. Aristotle strongly refuted the hypothesis (Frank, 1989). Plato who was mentored by the controversial philosopher Socrates was known for his strong opinions that were not fully embraced by everyone else. Plato seemed to have little or no regards to art and poetry whatsoever which is particularly vexing given he was Aristotle's teacher. According to Plato, art lacked authenticity as it was merely a copy of reality. Plato believed that art could never represent reality or offer any knowledge whatsoever. Plato affirmed that "…as we experience it, is an illusion, a collection of mere appearances like reflections in a mirror or shadows on a wall" (Wade, 1996). Plato strongly upheld that art was false and that the only sensible reality was the world that was created by a supreme being in utter perfection. Aristotle was one of the famous philosophers that rejected Plato's theory. Despite the twenty years of learning from Plato and revering him for decades, Aristotle's philosophy eventually diverted from Plato's beliefs and understandably so.

It is uncertain as to whether the indifference between Aristotle and Plato was caused by the different philosophies they upheld or personal differences. Consequently, due to Plato's attest, the relationship between art and epistemology has been contestable (Dorter, 1973). Plato explained that while art may give us meaningful experiences, it is uncertain as to whether the said experiences impart any propositional knowledge (Oliveira & De Abreu, 2015). Although many critics including Aristotle found Plato's proclamation to be unacceptable, the judgment is not entirely far-fetched. Aristotle refuses to believe that there is any justification for Plato's claims and, as a result, dismisses it. Plato warned against engaging in poetry and art as they were mainly mimetic representations of the world which in most cases were inaccurate. Frank (1989) enunciated that Aristotle believed that one could learn from art. Unlike Plato, Aristotle strongly believed that art had the ability to sway one's perspective and develop their moral character in the process. Aristotle went further to opposing Plato's claim that the mimetic feature of art was detrimental and states that it instead helps in developing emotional catharsis. Aristotle maintained that by learning and understanding the various frustrations and emotions, an individual is better positioned to rationally live their lives. Aristotle was of the opinion that art not only disseminated knowledge but was beneficial to society.

In his research on Greek dramatic art, Aristotle compares tragedy to comedy and epic. Aristotle's definition of tragedy has been discussed severally by scholars in scientific literature but no definite explanation has been attained. "genus proximum" is mentioned in the classical definition of the word tragedy (Frank, 1989). The term Aristotle believed that similar to all forms of poetry, tragedy also had mimetic characteristics. The use of tragedy in art and poetry is to elicit emotions thus bringing about an emotional catharsis. Plato's claim that art was not knowledgeable was proven to be merely fallacious by Aristotle who affirmed that tragedy had the ability to impact people and teaches them specific critical lessons. For example, the Oedipus at Colonus was one of the most popular Greek tragedies which despite the damages still had a happy ending. Oliveira & De Abreu (2015) elaborates that Aristotle does not agree with Plato that art and poetry are meager "shadows of shadows" since a representation of tragedy is as real as the incident and circumstances in which it may occur. Art and poetry have the ability to change the world by imparting relevant knowledge of individuals.

If Plato would have been given the opportunity to respond to Aristotle's hypothesis on art and its mimetic features, he would undoubtedly term the assertion preposterous. Using the platonic philosophy, aesthetics is not real. According to Plato, art is a mirror image of the world and, therefore, is elusive (Oliveira & De Abreu, 2015). Thus, art entails superficial knowledge based on the accidental aspects of reality. Art exists solely as a means of expression and to give pleasure to aesthetes but not as a source of knowledge. Although many may not necessarily conform to the platonic explanation, it is apparent that his arguments were not entirely misplaced. Given the development and revolution of art, Plato's perception of art may have been influenced in one way or another (Oliveira & De Abreu, 2015). The introduction of contemporary art changed the dynamics under which art was perceived. Art has been introduced in the formal education system as a subject used to teach various life lessons (Dorter, 1973). Plato would have joined the many cognitive philosophers in developing and encouraging art as a monumental source of knowledge in society. However, Plato's input should not be entirely disregarded and instead, people should heed the warning given on the mimetic characteristics of art.

Poetry is an important contribution to the art. According to Aristotle poetry is both futuristic and knowledgeable, even more so compared to history. Aristotle's remarks were not well-received by historians who dismissed him as having "deplorable blindness to histography".

Aristotle observed the ad hominem principle and carefully picked his word so as not to spark any antagonism between historians and poets. Aristotle averted that poetry was closer to philosophy than history. Thus, he did not remove history from its status but instead gave poetry some superiority. Aristotle concluded that poetry dwelled on the occurrence of future events unlike history which dwelled on past evidence. Additionally, Aristotle disagreed with Plato on the assertion that art was not knowledgeable. Plato argued that art was only a representation of reality and thus uses mimetic features would be pernicious to society. Aristotle contrasted Plato's thoughts and explained that art has the ability to significantly impact the community and adequately provide knowledge.

References

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