

Philosophie - Wettbewerb 2023

III

Die Welt der Kunst & Fantasie ist die wahre, the rest is a nightmare.

~ Arno Schmidt

I

I first heard about the concept of solipsism when I was nine years old. Like many others, the question of what we know, what even can be known, fascinated me completely. It is the reason I got into philosophy in the first place. Even now, after several years and the quiet realisation that it's very difficult to build a philosophy on complete scepticism, the topic still has a certain charm. And I'm hardly the only one. After all, over two thousand years have passed since Plato first wrote about the idea that maybe, not everything we see is the complete truth, yet his texts are still in vivid discussion.

By now, humanity has lots of fancy equipment for looking at what our nature alone does not allow us to perceive, but still, a translation of sorts is needed to be able to make sense of it. And even in the parts of the world where we assume to understand, much is simply a story our brain tells us. For example, magenta does not exist. There is no associated wavelength of light. Magenta is the brain's interpretation of two wavelengths on the opposite ends of the visible spectrum hitting the eye simultaneously. Usually, that gets interpreted as the average wavelength out of all of them but in the case of magenta, that would result in the already prevalent colour of green. The solution to this is to simply make up a colour.

What I love about this anecdote is how it shows that even in so simple cases like a colour, you can't trust your own perception. What is there that isn't already interpretation and fantasy? What is magenta?

II

Arno Schmidt's quote starts with 'Die Welt der Kunst & Fantasie ist die wahre, [...]'. The discussion of the relationship between art and knowledge is generally composed of two completely different approaches; a more scientific way to view it in the context of how art can be used as a means to gain knowledge about the people and times it centres around and a more philosophical approach of the wisdom that can be gained through art.

Aristotle famously wrote that poetry 'is more philosophical and more serious than history: in fact poetry speaks more of universals, whereas history of particulars.' I would like to particularly point out that he did not claim poetry to be philosophy – it simply helps understanding it. One could argue that through art, you can still gain knowledge, for example when studying history, but I do not think increase of knowledge to be the function of art. Instead, I argue that art embraces the own subjectivity in order to create something more meaningful than hard facts. After all, if everybody were to agree with and interpret art the exact same way, would we still bother with it? And isn't this inherent individuality what makes it special? Art tries to bridge the unbridgeable rift between every human's experiences on being a human.

In art, it is important not to confuse the work's philosophical and scientific judgements with their aesthetic value. A story is not inherently worse if it never happened, if it's 'just' a story. Not inherently better either, though. Art is your own world, that's what makes it worthwhile.

III

Absurdism is the belief that firstly, life as a whole is absurd and secondly, the ways to deal with this are denial, rejection and acceptance. I would argue that escape to fantasy is in a way rejection of the absurd. Like suicide, instead of dealing with the world, one simply removes the self from its premises in order to avoid dealing with their horrors.

I do not want to argue that life in fantasy couldn't possibly be happy or that life is always better. Yes, it can be a nightmare, there is misery we'll most likely not defeat in this lifetime, there are riddles we won't solve.

Earlier, I shortly mentioned philosophy. Isn't this the soul of it? Asking the questions science can't answer, still discussing the same topic many hundreds of years later? Still trying to escape Plato's cave?

IV

There is this very weird thing, it's called existence, I believe. People have been talking about it for quite some time now. If you've ever experienced those grey weeks when nothing makes sense and everything seems like just another day of the same nonsense, I'm sure you'll agree that few things are as difficult as always being content with it – I know I had my share of bad days. But then again when those days end (and they will end, they always do), when one finally leaves the house again, the world does seem remarkably beautiful. As G. K. Chesterton wrote: 'But now a great thing in the street/ seems any human nod,/ Where shift in strange democracy/ the million masks of God'

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There is this story, a couple years old by now, that people like to tell when talking about consciousness of the killer whale J35, who carried her dead calf for 1600 km, 17 days long. She didn't do that because of any robotic need, there is no evolutionary advantage for this. She did it because she was grieving.

This will always be a part of being, or at least for a long time. But I believe that if there ever will come a time when all the big mysteries are solved, children are taught of how consciousness works in the same breath as they learn their ABC's, I think that some distant relative will look back at us and long for a time where we knew more of the stars than the minds that look into the telescope. And maybe that far cousin will feel a certain kind of admiration because despite knowing nearly nothing, despite living a short life in ignorance we still got up and continued to be. Going into hiding for some time, sure, but not forever. It's a short life in horror and unknowing, but the view is quite spectacular. And maybe we'll be fine again tomorrow?