ARISTOTLE’S VIEW OF KNOWLEDGE (AND SOME OBJECTIONS)
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ARISTOTLE’S VIEW (VERY BRIEF SYNOPSIS, BASED ON A SHORT EXCERPT FROM COTTINGHAM’S WESTERN PHILOSOPHY: AN ANTHOLOGY, Malden: Blackwell, 1996, repr. 2008 (2nd ed.), pp. 19-21): For Aristotle, sense perceptions of similar events lead to memories, which when repeated lead to experience. Intuition is the ability to simultaneously see the universal in a particular. E.g., I look at THIS (particular) desk and I realize (as long as I have been told once that this is a desk) that that object is A desk (a kind of thing like this …). Also, Aristotle has a phrase, “the perception is of a universal,” on page 20 that pretty much defines intuition. So, experience, intuition, and induction lead to one’s knowing the starting points, which are the true, self-evident premises of the syllogism. A syllogism is a deductive argument, which can lead to either one’s possessing either demonstrative knowledge or a skill. Here’s a diagram of Aristotle’s view of knowledge:

[Diagram of Aristotle’s view of knowledge]

- Sense Perception (repeated) (p. 20)
- Memory (repeated) (p. 20)
- Experience (p. 20)
- Intuition (p. 21)
- Induction [thinking the future will resemble the past (Yount Lecture 1, and see Aristotle, p. 20-21, for more)]
- Syllogism (pp. 19-20)
  - Premise 1 (Starting point)
  - Premise 2 (Starting point)
- Conclusion [the conclusion must be an “eternal truth” (p. 20) or what cannot be otherwise (p. 19) to be Demonstrative/Scientific Knowledge; if the conclusion is only experiential and deals with changeable/perishable things, then it is a skill (p. 20)]
THE OBJECTIONS:

In the first category of objections, I have what I consider to be the more fair objections against Aristotle’s view:

1. **OBJ1: Can you Always Trust your Senses?** Aristotle is aware that our senses deceive us (see, e.g., Nic. Ethics, when he discusses wine tasting bitter when one is ill and sweet when one is healthy—though this may be a poor textual example for my point!), so how can he just say that we can trust our senses in order to gain knowledge? For example, say I see a magic trick where I personally inspect two metal rings for as long as I want, and find no flaws in them, but then I watch a magician separate and join them 150 times, and I have no way to explain how that can happen. That’s repeated sense perception with repeated memories of seeing that happen, so now do I KNOW that solid metal rings can be joined and separated, and if not, why not?

2. **OBJ2: There is Innate Knowledge:** [NOTE: This is a weak OBJ, and cannot be used as an OBJ in the Aristotle paper topic; this is a pretty weak objection, since we don’t have convincing evidence for innate knowledge.] However, given that Aristotle ends up saying that we need to have knowledge in order to get knowledge (see OBJ3), in some way, knowledge (and not merely a capacity for it as Aristotle says) must already reside in us somehow, no?

3. **OBJ3: We need to Have Knowledge in order to Get Knowledge?** Aristotle says that we know the starting points, via senses, intuition, experience, etc. [The premises must be better known than the conclusion (p. 19.)] How does this work for the very first time, if the initial question is, “How can we know anything?” To respond that we need to know something in order to have knowledge seems circular, doesn’t it? But Aristotle does not believe in innate knowledge, so we cannot already have some knowledge in order to gain more knowledge, on his view.

4. **OBJ4: What Happened to our Being Able to Know Sensible Objects?** Aristotle starts off his philosophical career arguing that we can know sensible objects because they are the primary substances. Based on these two pages, however, he really does not say that we can really know anything in the physical world (note that he says we can’t have knowledge of eclipses, for example, on page 20). So he doesn’t seem to stick with what he started off trying to prove, right?

5. **OBJ5: Faulty Reasoning?** Aristotle actually says in the last paragraph on page 21 that opinion and reasoning admit of falsehood! If reason admits of falsehood, then isn’t reasoning involved in syllogisms, and wouldn’t using our reasoning presumably be the way in which we’re supposed to correct our senses for optical illusions and faulty perceptions, if they can’t be trusted?

6. **OBJ6: Shouldn’t We Be Able to Know Beauty?** According to Aristotle, the universal beauty, or what all beautiful things have in common, is in every beautiful object. If we can have knowledge of sensible objects, then we should be able to know beauty, since it’s just what all beautiful objects have in common. But why does everyone not agree about what beauty is, then, if it’s knowable, immutable, and in the object?

7. **OBJ7: Intuition can be wrong:** Aristotle claims that “scientific knowledge and intuition (nous) are always true” (p. 21) and “nothing is more true than scientific knowledge except intuition” (p. 21). Say I look out my window and see a cardboard cut-out of my father and judge that it is a man, my father. I have not just seen the kind of thing that a man is, but the kind of thing that a cardboard cut-out is. But if intuition is always true, how can I have this experience?

In the second category of objections, I have objections that are anachronistic and so possibly unfair to ask Aristotle; however, I would think that someone who now wants to defend Aristotle’s epistemological view at this point should seemingly have a plausible answer to these objections (if I’m right about what Aristotle thinks we can know):

8. **OBJ8: Can you Always Trust your Senses (Part II, Courtesy of Descartes and Berkeley)?** Descartes questions our senses in Meditation I, and way beyond that, with the Dream Argument and the
Evil Demon Hypothesis – your entire experience could be nothing but a manipulation of your mind – you may not even have a body. Also, Berkeley would argue that we are only in touch with impressions (like Descartes does in *Meditation II*), so how can we really know the primary substances really have matter that makes them up?

9. **OBJ9: Hume, Part I: On Induction**: Lecture 1 (courtesy of Hume, whose article on this issue we cover later in the semester) defined induction as an argument wherein the premises *partially* prove the conclusion. Examples included generalization, predication and causal inference. So how can we prove that the next time experience X, that X will either behave the same way, or cause Y? Keep in mind that Aristotle states that the premises must be “better known than” the conclusion (19), and also states that the conclusion has to be an eternal truth (20) that cannot be otherwise (19). Aristotle states that we use induction to *know* the starting points; but how can we know the starting points cannot be otherwise, using induction?

10. **OBJ10: Hume, Part II: On Causation**: Aristotle says that knowledge deals with knowing the cause of the causes, and that this must be known as true, necessarily, and, if so, will be an eternal truth, if his conditions are satisfied (p. 20). Hume argues that we cannot know the necessary causes of any physical objects. (In fact, based on induction, we cannot even know that physical laws necessarily remain the same over time, and will remain the same in the future.)

11. **OBJ11: Evolution**: If Aristotle is thinking that we can know the same, stable nature (perhaps genetic structure) of frogs, and if evolution is true, then we cannot demonstrate this and it can’t be scientific knowledge, right, since the nature of frogs changes over time and “can be otherwise.” So Aristotle’s view starts looking more and more like Hume’s view, that we can only really know mathematical truths, and nothing in the physical world (unless he can answer at least OBJs 7 and 8)?

12. **OBJ12: Can we Trust our Memories?** If our memories are faulty (that is, psychologists currently think that we creatively reconstruct our memories to suit the way we’d like for us to remember events, and that we change our memories every time—or very often—we recall the same event), then how can we say that we can trust our “experience” that are based on our repeated memories?

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