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Van Gogh's "The Night Café" Helps Explain Aristotle's Category Scheme

It is fairly safe to assume that when Vincent Van Gogh began painting "The Night Café" in 1888 that he did not have Aristotle's category scheme in mind. However, when reflecting on the famous artwork in light of Aristotle's categories, the types of entities depicted in the art parallel many (if not all) of those entities that Aristotle had in mind when developing his method to define everything that exists in the world. From "primary substances" such as chairs and tables to "secondary substances" such as the light emitting from ceiling fixtures, many relations between Aristotle's metaphysics and Van Gogh's art can begin to be made. Similarly, many references can be made of Ludwig Wittgenstein's categorial scheme to the painting as well, making this an excellent piece for unpacking the complicated metaphysical concepts that these two philosophers were attempting to convey.

A good place to start analyzing is by first discussing the scene that is being depicted in "The Night Café." It is the inside of a café with five customers sitting at various tables and one waiter walking towards the front of the painting. There is a billiards table in the middle of the room, and a curtained doorway at the rear of the room, which is just beyond a bar-looking structure that has several bottles atop it as well as a vase of flowers. The scene is vividly painted using bright red for the walls, bright green for the ceiling and a mustard yellow color for the floors. The tops of the tables are a light, bright blue and the light fixtures hanging from the ceiling have been painted in a vivid yellow color very similar to that of the floor beneath them.

The purpose of Aristotle's category scheme is to ontologically define everything that

exists in the world. In other words, every single entity has to fall into one of the ten categories provided: substance (primary and secondary), quantity, quality, relation, place, date, posture, state, action and passion. And while it is highly debated whether or not Aristotle thought this to be an exhaustive list, it is much less debatable whether or not he thought that a given category scheme would encompass all entities whatsoever. Being a “categorical realist,” Aristotle believed that a category scheme would provide not only a way to classify every entity whatsoever, but also a way of understanding of what the world is like in itself.

A category, for Aristotle, is a two-part function that serves to provide such classification. The first part is that a category is the most general kind of way to classify entities whatsoever, and the second part is that the mode of classification for a specific category is going to be formally distinct from that of another. This formal distinction mentioned in the second part is made between the predication of “primary substances” and both “secondary substances” and the “non-substantial” categories.

For example, Aristotle’s first category, substance (1), is comprised of two sub-categories: 1a) primary substance, and 1b) secondary substance. The remaining nine categories, quantity (2), quality (3), relation (4), place (5), date (6), posture (7), state (8), action (9) and passion (10), are considered “non-substantial” categories. Secondary substances and the nine non-substantial categories depend for their existence on primary substances, which is what makes them “non-substantial.” Primary substances differ in the sense that they are “hylomorphic compounds” (comprised of matter and form). Secondary substances and non-substantial categories are not hylomorphic compounds and are therefore not substantial. To put it another way, secondary substances and the non-substantial categories depend for their

existence in primary substances. The “form” in primary substances comes from either that of the secondary substances or that of the non-substantial categories.

The distinguishing factor between primary substances and that of secondary substances and the remaining nine non-substantial categories is determined by the mode of predication used: either “inhering in” or “said of”. The “said of” mode of predication is used between secondary substances and primary substances: that is, secondary substances are “said of” primary substances. To use Aristotle’s example, “man is said of Socrates” – man being the secondary substance and Socrates being the primary substance. The “inhering in” mode of predication is illustrated between that of non-substantial categories and primary substances. For example, the color black “inheres in” a particular chair – the color black being a non-substantial category (quality) and the particular chair being a primary substance. In other words, primary substances are not predicated of anything, but secondary substances and non-substantial categories predicate primary substances.

To make clear the distinction between the categories and the different modes of predication used it is helpful to reflect on the scene depicted in Van Gogh’s painting. Some primary substances in the painting include the individual chairs, the flower vase, the individual bottles, individual light fixtures, the billiards table, and so on. What makes each of these a primary substance is that they each do not depend for their existence on anything else: they are each their own freestanding entity. Secondary substances in the painting include furniture (a generalization of the chairs and tables) and the room (a generalization of the four walls that make the room possible). What makes these each a secondary substance (and not a primary substance) is that they depend for their existence on primary substances. “Furniture” cannot

exist without the existence of chairs or tables and so on, in the same way that a room depends for its existence on the four individual walls. By definition, a room is not a room without the walls to define such a space. In each of these cases, the secondary substances are “said of” or “predicates” of primary substances. The primary substances are never “said of” or predicates of secondary substances (or any other category, for that matter).

Similarly, examples of non-substantial categories are also depicted in the painting. For example, the category of quantity is illustrated by the number of people in the café, the number of balls on the billiards table, the cluster of flowers that are seen in the vase on the bar, etc. Using the particular example of the vase of flowers, the quantity of flowers in the vase inheres in the flower arrangement. The category quantity can't exist unless it inheres in a primary substance (such as a flower). Further examples of how the non-substantial categories necessarily inhere in primary substances can be seen in the light that emits from a ceiling fixture (quality), how felt on a table with billiard balls makes a billiards table (relation), people spatially arranged in various corners of the room (place), the clock on the wall displaying a time of 1:00a.m. (date), people sitting in chairs (posture), a man wearing a hat (state), a waiter serving tables (action) and customers being served by the waiter (passion). Each of these categories represented are illustrating how they inhere in primary substances. To further iterate, people sitting in chairs cannot have such a posture without first being a primary substance (a person), and the action of a waiter serving tables cannot occur without the existence of a primary substance (the waiter who is performing the action).

Philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein agrees with Aristotle in that logical forms of language are a way to capture the form of reality as such, but he disagrees with Aristotle on what is

considered to be “ontologically basic”, or in other words, the most fundamental. Aristotle believes that things not in combination are ontologically basic (i.e., primary substances), while Wittgenstein believes that things in combination are ontologically basic (i.e., facts).

For example, Aristotle thinks that primary substances are individuals that are so fundamentally basic that they cannot be said of any other category and nor can inhere in any other category. Primary substances enjoy independent existence and it is this independent existence that is the main constituent of what it means to be a primary substance.

Wittgenstein, on the other hand, believes that things in combination are what are fundamentally basic. For example, for Wittgenstein, the kinds of things that are ontologically basic are not primary substances such as a particular chair or light fixture, etc., but rather he would argue that the states of affairs (or, “a combination of objects”) of which objects are instantiated are ontologically basic. The fact that there are people in the café sitting, eating drinking and conversing is what is ontologically basic, not the individual people, and the individual beverages that independently make up such an affair.

In conclusion, although Aristotle and Wittgenstein disagreed on what was most ontologically basic in the world, Van Gogh’s painting “The Night Café” serves as an effective method for illustrating each philosopher’s metaphysical views. In addition to being an iconic piece of art for the Dutch painter, it has proved to also serve as a method for unpacking the complex metaphysical concepts of Aristotle and Wittgenstein’s categorial schemes.